

SADIE

KARL
EDWIN
HARRIMAN



125

San Francisco
Calif. 1882

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S A D I E

PLATE



“Beside him, her face drawn and ashen, Sadie crouched—one hand pressed to her cheek.”

[Page 287.]

S A D I E

*The Story of a Girl, Some Men, and
the Eternal Fitness of Things*

By

KARL EDWIN HARRIMAN



D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK MCMVII

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Published October, 1907

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S A D I E

CHAPTER I

KELSEY'S NUMBER ONE

THE hands of the octagonal clock over the cashier's cage in Kelsey's No. 1 indicated eight minutes after twelve. Since noon a coatless cohort had filed through the narrow entrance and defiled to the semi-circular stool counter at the farther end of the room or formed in groups around the multitudinous tables that crowded one another in the middle distance.

Eight minutes after twelve in Kelsey's No. 1 may mean much or little, depending upon whether the reader be a dweller in Kansas City or a resident of Elsewhere, though—it may be said in passing—to the Kansas citizen, native born or acclimated, there is no Elsewhere.

Kelsey's No. 1 has flourished since the mind of man runneth not to the contrary—in Kansas City; but since the beginning, so far at least as it is known, Kelsey—the Kelsey—has not once appeared upon the scene of his gastronomic triumph. About the place itself—to patrons and to employees alike—he is but a legend, a pale tradition, a mere cognomen, without form or substance, and this despite the fact that “Kelsey's pie” and “Kelsey's buttermilk”—in season—are known to every weary

Sadie

traveler who, descending from a dusty car in the clamorous Union Station, a biscuit toss away, ever accosted the first official porter whom he chanced to meet with the question which makes all mankind kin:

“ Say, where can I get something to eat? ”

Nor is it strange perhaps that, together with his pie and buttermilk, Kelsey's “ girls ” should occupy a plane apart. The genius Kelsey, catering to famished man, foresaw in the beginning, it would seem, the necessity or, rather, the wisdom, of æstheticizing appetite by a simultaneous ocular appeal, for in all the years that Kelsey's No. 1 has swung its tarnished sign above the heads of hurrying, hungry man, “ Kelsey's girls,” as familiarly they are called, have been known in the vernacular of the road as “ the peachiest pie slingers between Chicago and the coast! ” Equally facile in opening and scooping clean the luscious shell of cantaloupe, or holding their own in an across-board conversation more picturesque, perhaps, than proper, judged by the accepted standards of Eastern civilization, many of them have, in the years that are gone, graduated from the stool counter or the little iron-rimmed, wire-legged tables, and taken their places, without apparent jar, in the rococco drawing-rooms of Montana copper kings, or the lonesome *haciendas* of Panhandle cattle princes. Western girls all, children of the soil, there is about them something—perhaps an aura—strangely, markedly, missing from their sisters of the farther East. Call it what you choose; buoyant cheerfulness as manifested in dancing eyes and flashing teeth; perfect confidence, as suggested

Kelsey's Number One

in the poise of chin or firmness of their carriage—or what not; there are many ticket scalpers, warehouse clerks, and railway employees who feel their hearts go thumping in their breasts, as at five minutes after twelve they approach the narrow door of Kelsey's No. 1.

Within fifteen minutes from the arrival of the first coatless messenger before the noon whistles had ceased to tear the quivering atmosphere of this torrid summer day every stool at the counter held its clamoring man, and all the tables near the entrance—where was to be had a whiff of the outer air as now and then a late arrival entered, mopping his beady brow upon the sleeve of his colored shirt—were filled. The superheated atmosphere of the place was thick with the heavy odor of hot food, and above the clatter of the solid dishes and the clang of cutlery upon them, rose, stridently, the cryptic wails of the waitresses, and the echoes from the kitchen beyond where, at long steam-tables, twelve men and boys in white, square caps and crumpled aprons carved and ladled and scooped and spread the specialties of the day.

"Draw one with brown on the side and two in a cup!" cried a tall blonde creature across the room.

"Ham and, for three!" shrilled another, at the same time punching the check of a "bread-and-milker," who had already finished.

Between the regular frequenters of the place and the girls who served them appeared to exist an easy familiarity, a quality of good fellowship, almost indeed *cameraderie*, as might have been gathered from the snatches of jibing conversation audible now and then.

Sadie

"Maggie, I ordered corned beef, not corned boot——"

"I told that guy to be careful; that you was particular," was the quick reply, accompanied by a smile designed, no doubt, to compensate the complainant for any lack of savor in the food that she had served him.

"Janet, here, wait a minute," called a little man with watery eyes and a scant mustache. The Diana of the dishes paused in her mad rush to the kitchen and looked down.

"How about to-night?" pleaded the little man.

She shook her head and made to go, but he clutched her apron.

"To-morrow night, then?" he supplicated.

"Nor to-morrow night, neither."

"Won't you *ever* go?" Another would have succumbed to the pathetic note of appeal in his frail voice, but the girl only snatched away her apron, saying: "Engagements all the week."

The little man seemed to take heart then, for he shouted after her: "You must be running your date book on double entry!"

She had no reply for him just then, but as she passed the table at which he sat over his bowl of soup, on her return from the kitchen, she observed, quite as if their conversation had sustained no interruption:

"You bet your life I am, and I'm thinking of hiring a private secretary. Want the job?"

A score of sated diners crowded around the cashier's cage, and the continuous tinkle of the register bell sig-

Kelsey's Number One

naled the fact that the rush was over for another noon. A youth who stood absently by chewing a toothpick, with his hand on the latch and his eyes fixed upon the cashier's classic profile, was nearly upset as the door was suddenly and violently swung back from without and a girl entered.

"Sure, I'll excuse you!" called the young man ironically, as she moved majestically down the room, nodding and smiling at such of the more leisurely diners as accosted her. Limply she sank upon a chair at a table beside the window, halfway to the swinging kitchen doors, where immediately two of the girls joined her.

"I suppose you want to know what's the matter?" she said, before either of them could speak. "Well, I've quit."

With great deliberation she drew off a lisle glove that had once been white, and smoothed the fingers.

"Quit!"

She looked up.

"Yes, quit," she declared, "and, Grace, if you love me," she added breathlessly, "for Heaven's sake get me a cup of coffee and some of that *kartofal salad*, if there's any left, and a piece of strawberry shortcake. I'm nearly all in!"

The blonde creature glided away, and the girl remaining leaned over the table and gazed dazedly into the newcomer's face.

"When'd you do it, Sadie?" she asked in an undertone.

"Last night."

Sadie

Drawing the pins from her sailor hat she tossed it upon a near-by chair and straightened her towering pompadour.

"But ain't it kind of sudden? I didn't——"

"Some, Frances. I guess I took about five minutes to make up my mind, and maybe half a minute to tell the boss when I had it made up," was the quick reply.

"What did he say? Wasn't he s'prised?" Frances's eyes were sparkling.

"Looked like a freight car had butted into him. I let him get his wind, then told him I wanted my money."

"Did he give it to you?"

Sadie shook her head. "That's what I'm here for now," she said.

The girl Grace had returned with a loaded tray. "Sadie," she declared, "there ain't a bit of *kartofal* left, but here's some cold slaw and ice cream. They say the shortcake's fine, but I ain't had any, have you, Frances?"

She arranged the dishes in a crescent in front of the girl with the pompadour and dropped upon the chair beside her.

"What's it all for, Sadie?" she asked. "Ain't they treated you right? I was sayin' to Frances, just a little while ago, when the girls was talkin' 'bout——"

"Oh, they've treated me all right," Sadie broke in. "It ain't that. Just wait till I plant some of this and I'll tell you."

And while she ate, tasting in turn from the contents of each dish before her, Grace and Frances, across the

Kelsey's Number One

table, watched her from eyes of blue and eyes of brown in which burned steadily the holy light of girlish loyalty.

At last she pushed away a half-eaten portion of tutti-frutti ice cream and leaned back in the frail, wire-framed chair with a sigh.

"That'll help—some," she murmured contentedly. "Maybe you think I haven't walked," she exclaimed, smoothing her skirt at the hips. "I used to make fun of folks that knocked the hills in this town, but I'll never do it again. Maybe I'll miss 'em, though, when I haven't got 'em to climb any more," she added, and if in her voice as she spoke or in her eyes appeared that instant a sign betokening the deadening weariness of her heart, it was lost upon the two girls across the little table.

"You ain't going to leave town, are you?" Grace's blue eyes were wide with wonder.

Sadie nodded. "Yes, girls"—she spoke with slow deliberation—"I am—if I can; no more K. C. for mine—if I make a go of it." The pale ghost of a smile crept across her lips as she spoke.

Suddenly in Grace's face appeared a wonderful radiance. "I know!" she cried, a-tremble with ecstasy. "Sadie"—she leaned forward eagerly, her plump hands clasped upon the table—"you're going to get married! Oh, Sadie, it's Jim, ain't it?"

Sadie's eyelids flickered, and she drew the edge of her lower lip between her teeth. On her lap, hidden beneath the table, her fingers curled rigidly in the palms of her hands.

Sadie

With a little smile she shook her head again and the radiance went out of Grace's face.

"Not for mine," she declared icily. "Not for mine, Gracie." She laid her hands on the table then and, leaning forward, added: "And if I ever *do* step off—*it won't be—with Jim.*"

"Why, I thought, Sadie," Frances began, but was stopped by the flash from Sadie's eyes.

"I know what you thought," she sneered. "Everybody else thought it, too. Maybe I thought it myself." She uttered a little mirthless laugh. "But it's all wrong."

"Have you told him?" It was a daring question even in the light of their intimacy, and Grace regretted asking it almost before the last word had left her lips.

"I guess he knows," was the significant reply.

The tensy of the moment was relieved by Frances, who inquired:

"Where you going, Sadie? What you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. I'll try to see the Carter people this afternoon. Maybe they've got something."

"Oh, Sadie," cried the emotional Grace, "that'll mean you'll go 'way out west somewhere and we'll never see you again!"

"Maybe."

Sadie dared not trust her voice further. More than she had thought herself capable, Grace and Frances had made her feel what this going away might mean. Tears were gathering in her eyes. She recovered her hat and

Kelsey's Number One

fumbled for the pins. "I've got to be going," she said, after a moment.

"You'll run in to say good-by, won't you?" Frances asked tenderly.

"If I go," was the vague reply.

Sadie's business with the rotund manager of Kelsey's No. 1 was quickly over.

"Just remember, Sadie," the manager said to her, as they walked to the door together, "if you should change your mind and decide you'd like to come back, I guess we'll be able to use you—anyway in the fall," he added, as if by way of afterthought. And from the doorway he watched her as she crossed the street.

CHAPTER II

THE HEGIRA

A TRAVELING man called the attention of his companion to Sadie as she passed, apparently oblivious to the clamor about her, through the dingy waiting room of the dilapidated Union Station. Wearily she mounted the wide stairs at the end and glanced about her at the top. The corridor was deserted as she proceeded less briskly down its length. If, since she had determined to leave Kansas City and the memories its streets evoked, she experienced a tremor of misgiving it was now. Indeed for a little instant she hesitated doubtfully and studied the coarse matting at her feet. As she stood thus a door on her right opened quickly, and a red-haired young man in his shirt sleeves confronted her. In one hand he clutched a quantity of correspondence, and over his right ear projected the round tip of a blue penholder. He had appeared so suddenly that Sadie was startled; then their eyes met and she smiled frankly.

"Can you tell me where the offices of the Carter System are?" she asked.

"Whom do you want to see?" the young man inquired.

A little frown clouded the girl's forehead. "I don't know," she confessed. "That is, I don't know the name,

The Hegira

I mean; but it's the man that hires girls to wait in the eating houses."

He grinned. "Looking for a job, huh?" The impertinence was redeemed by the saving twinkle in his eyes.

Sadie nodded.

"Stevens is the man you want to see," he told her. "That's his office down there at the end; No. 14; see it on the transom? He's the superintendent." He came nearer. "But I don't think it'll do you any good," he added in low-voiced confidence. "He's turned down more'n a dozen to-day. Try it if you wanta though."

"I guess I will," Sadie replied, and as she walked on the red-haired youth stared after her until she came to the door at the end of the corridor, when he turned on his heel and ran down the wide stairway humming a street-organ air.

The inscription on the frosted glass stared coldly into Sadie's face:

| |
|--|
| <p>THE CARTER SYSTEM</p> <p>OPERATING DINING CARS AND EATING HOUSES ON</p> <p>THE KANSAS CITY AND PACIFIC RAILWAY</p> <p>SUPERINTENDENT'S OFFICE</p> |
|--|

An instant her eyes lingered doubtfully upon the legend, then squaring her shoulders, as a man might have done, she opened the door and entered. Bent over a lit-

Sadie

tered roll-top desk between two windows, sat a man in a pivot chair who, as the door behind him closed, snapped, without turning: "Well, what is it?"

A wave of color swept over Sadie's face and she coughed. The man looked around then. Fearfully the girl's hand still lingered over the knob of the door as if she anticipated the necessity of sudden flight.

"Are you Mr. Stevens?" she boldly inquired.

"Yes, what you want?" was the brutal response. And yet, Sadie thought, there was nothing in his appearance to indicate the brusqueness of his manner. His thin, youthful face was half hidden by the tawny, pointed beard he wore; but the eyes that looked into her own through the rimless glasses were blue and kindly. He wore low shoes and colored stockings and an office coat of some soft gray stuff. His linen, she noted, was very fresh.

"My name is Sadie Morrison," she announced, "and I want a job."

She was a little frightened, else, no doubt, she would not have spoken so bluntly; but as it was a wan smile came into Stevens's face, as he started and shifted his position slightly. Dropping his eyes deliberately, and, beginning at the toes of her russet leather shoes, just visible beneath the hem of her skirt, he permitted them to crawl slowly up her figure, as she stood there by the door, one hand still grasping the knob, with the light from the two west windows full upon her. The creeping eyes noted the smooth hang of her brown skirt and the patent-leather belt, with its tarnished buckle of gilt

The Hegira

that encircled her small waist; the trim, snug-fitting gray blouse above, dotted with fine points of red; the touch of livelier color in the ribbon smoothly encircling her throat; the rounded chin; the lips parted in a smile over teeth from which twinkled the yellow glint of gold; the tilted, inquiring nose. Then his eyes of blue met hers of brown and lingered upon them an instant. He noted the breadth of her brow and the bulging pompadour, supporting at a slight angle over her right ear the blue-banded straw sailor with its two trembling, imitation amethyst pins projecting from either side.

Bravely Sadie had withstood his slow, critical scrutiny, and now, conscious that he was weighing her appearance—"front," she would have said—in the balance of his judgment, she smiled frankly and inquired:

"I guess you ain't apt to forget me, are you?"

Stevens laughed outright. Hooking a heel on the rung of a chair that stood at the end of the desk he drew it around and said:

"Sit down."

Sadie bit the edge of her lower lip in a way she had and meekly obeyed.

"Now tell me all about it; what's the row, anyway?"

Her eyes met his squarely.

"I've told you," she said, "I want a job, that's all; I don't see as there's anything else to say."

Stevens smiled. "Probably that's so," he replied, "but—well, to be frank with you, we have to be a little more careful than they do usually. Just to show you,

Sadie

I can say that I've turned down forty-seven girls within the week, and everyone of them came here looking for a job on the System, just as you have—only—well, they haven't gone about it in quite the same way. I have to judge a good deal by appearances, you know; girls lie sometimes, I've discovered."

"Sometimes we have to," was the frank response. "But if there ain't anything open," she added, "there's no use my sitting here."

She made as if to rise, but Stevens put forth a restraining hand.

"Hold on a minute; don't be in a hurry; I haven't turned you down yet, have I?" he reproved.

"Well, if it's up to you to do it, I wish you'd do it quick and have it over," she replied, without anger.

He leaned back in his chair until his feet swung clear of the floor. "Now, let's get down to brass tacks if you're in a hurry," he said. "How old are you,——"

"Sadie," she supplied, noting his hesitation.

"Oh, yes, how old are you, Sadie?"

"I'll be twenty-two next month."

"Live here in town?"

"Uh, huh."

"Any people?"

Her eyes dropped. An instant she hesitated. "Yes," she replied in so low a tone that her words were scarcely audible, "I've got a mother."

"Ever worked?"

At the question she looked up quickly and stared at him in wide-eyed amaze.

The Hegira

"Ever worked!" she gasped. "Good Lord, I ain't ever done anything else."

"I see," mused Stevens. Unconsciously his fingers had found a long, slim, steel envelope-opener on his desk, and now they played with it, turning it end and end, over and over, the while he continued to search Sadie's face with his mild blue eyes.

"How long have you been out of a job?" he asked after a moment.

"Since last night."

"Where'd you work up to then?"

"Kelsey's No. 1."

Stevens came erect. "Oh, I see!" he exclaimed, "one of Kelsey's girls, eh; had some experience then?"

"All I could get over there, I guess, if I stayed a hundred years."

Stevens chuckled; and then so quickly and unexpectedly that it almost took her breath away, he said:

"What do you want to leave town for?"

She let her eyes fall, and the color came again into her cheeks. Stevens rose and went to the window, wherefrom was to be had a murky view of the maze of tracks in the yards below.

"Sometimes a girl—a girl like me gets sick of things, Mr. Stevens." She spoke hesitatingly; as if it were difficult to find words to express herself. "Sometimes she gets so sick of 'em that she wants to run away, where everything's different—folks and all." She fell silent.

Sadie

Stevens folded his arms on the top of the desk and stared at her.

"Did he turn you down, Sadie?" he asked cruelly.

Her eyes flashed at that, and two hard lines appeared about her mouth.

"You bet your life he didn't," she snapped. "*I* did the turning down, if you want to know."

Stevens regarded her quizzically a moment, and then, as if satisfied with what he read in her upturned face, he said, "You wait here; I'll be back in a minute," and left the room. He returned with a long sheet of "flimsy," covered with typewritten lines in carbon, which he smoothed out on the desk.

"I find there's a girl needed at one of our houses," he explained, studying the sheet; "it's not one of the best stations, though," he added. "In fact, it's the last one we've opened up——"

"I don't care anything 'bout that," Sadie interrupted.

". . . and if you were to go out there it's likely you'd be pretty lonesome," Stevens ran on, without appearing to have noticed the interruption. "You see it's in the desert. Bagdad's the name of the town; ever hear of it?"

"I ain't ever been West of Topeka," Sadie replied.

"It's a new town yet," Stevens continued, "but it'll be a peach one of these days, when they open up the gold country North. It's out by Death Valley, you know. Ever hear of Death Valley?" He looked up.

"I ain't ever heard of it, but it sounds good to me," the girl replied. Stevens laughed.

The Hegira

"It gets pretty hot out there," he resumed. "Think you could stand a hundred and eighteen in the shade, if there was any shade—which there ain't? Think you could?"

"Yes, and then some," she assured him with a sigh.

"All right"—Stevens folded the sheet of "flimsy" with deliberation—"you can have a shot at it, if you want it at the salary—six a week, board, room, and laundry. You won't have much to do. When can you leave?"

"To-night, if you say so," was the quick reply.

Stevens's pleasure in her answer was apparent in his smile; a smile very different from the others her candid speeches had induced.

"Thompson's the manager out there," he told her. "You and he and the cook will have to hold down the place for a while. It's a pretty loud country, you know," he added warningly, "you want to be a little careful——"

"I guess I'll be able to take care of myself," was the significant assurance he received.

"I know that, but you'll find it some different from Kansas City," he went on. "You won't have any band concerts in the park out there, because there ain't any park, or any band either. Maybe there will be some day, though. Now about getting you there; if you can take No. 8 to-night, I'd like to have you. She pulls out of here at 10:10. Can you?"

"Easy," she declared.

He stood up. "All right, then," he said, "make your

Sadie

plans. Come in here about five-thirty and I'll have your transportation ready—berth and all."

Sadie rose, confronting him. Her eyes were misty, and as she spoke there came a little tremor into her voice.

"Mr. Stevens," she said, "I'm ever so much obliged. It's kind o' smoothed things out for me." She looked down.

Oddly enough Stevens experienced that instant a sensation of embarrassment.

"All right," he made a little impatient gesture; "I guess you'll make a go of it out there. I'll wire Thompson in the morning you're on your way."

"And if I don't deliver the goods," she declared, as she lingered in the doorway, "it's because my name ain't Sadie Morrison." And Stevens stood a moment staring at the door after she had gone.

At the head of the stairs she encountered the red-haired young man again. He smiled boldly at her, and in the gayety of her spirit she returned the smile.

"Looks like you got it," he chanced.

"I did." And she winked at him mockingly.

The red-haired young man strode directly to the superintendent's office.

"Where'd you plant that peacherino I just met on the stairs, Henny?" he called, thrusting his head past the edge of the door.

"Bagdad," Stevens replied with a chuckle.

"Bagdad!" cried the other. "Good Lord, Henny, she'll be done to a crisp in three weeks!"

"I know it"—Stevens had not looked around—



“‘And if I don’t deliver the goods . . .
it’s because my name ain’t Sadie
Morrison.’”

The Hegira

"that's what she needs, to judge from her talk. And she'll have Thompson jumpin' through doughnuts in *less'n* three weeks; and that's what *he* needs. It's a great country, Jimmy—out there."

Meantime Sadie had returned to Kelsey's. Grace and Frances, her intimates among the score of girls employed in No. 1, rejoiced with her in her great luck. Later she had supper there; "the last," she called it, and when afterwards she bade them good-by Grace's blue eyes filled with tears. "You'll write us once in a while, won't you, Sade, just to let us know how you like it?" she pleaded tremulously. And Sadie gave them her promise.

The hands of the clock over the sidewalk in front of Frieberg's cut-rate ticket office marked nine-fifty as Sadie, carrying an imitation leather suit case with the initials S. M. in black on one end, came around the corner under the electric light at the same instant that a man stepped out of Frieberg's. Perceiving the girl, who had not seen him, he quickened his pace.

He caught her by the arm. "Sadie, where you going?" he asked sharply, his lips close to her cheek. She gasped, snatched away her arm, and confronted him.

"Jim Lacy!"—her tones cut like a knife—"I told you I never wanted you to speak to me again. I told you yesterday what I thought of you, and I'll tell you now; you're a liar and a sneak, and if you got the chance I guess you'd be a thief——"

Under the stinging lash of her words he winced; but

Sadie

in his voice when next he spoke was the plea of a child.

“Sadie—won’t you lemme explain——”

“Explain nothing!” He had made to take her arm again, but she snatched it away. “You couldn’t explain if you talked all night. I wish to God I’d found it out before; you dog, you! Now, Jim Lacy, listen here; I’m going to quit Kansas City to-night. Probably I’ll never come back; but I want you to remember this: If you try to find me, and come where I am with any more of your lies, I’ll kill you! Do you hear? I’ll kill you!”

He had shrunk from her, his eyes blankly fixed upon her face in which burned all the passion she was capable of feeling. Before he could recover she had run swiftly across the street and disappeared within the station.

CHAPTER III

BAGDAD

UPON the trembling bosom of the desert, Man, in seeming irony, had pinned a jewel of paste, and called it Bagdad.

To the tired and dusty transcontinental traveler who—as his long, twelve-Pullman train came to a grinding stop before the squat, red station—pressed his nose against the grimy window, the reason for the town's existence was not at once apparent. Close—so close, indeed, that were he to extend a hand he might almost touch its dull façade—stood the station. Ahead, reared a round water tank; behind—the desert. Off beyond the station and the tank, prone in the trembling glare, and apparently asleep, lay Bagdad. Its assault upon the commerce of the Southwest was indicated by the single row of low wooden structures, all possessing false fronts with one exception, which faced the dusty stretch behind the station, called by residents Main Street. Half a hundred 'dobe houses lay scattered about like popcorn on a sheet of dull-gray paper, and an occasional goat was to be observed, here and there, nibbling a castaway newspaper or the gaudy label from a case that once had held an assortment of vegetables in tins.

In the round water tank that lifted its imposing lines

to the unflecked turquoise sky lay the fundamental reason for the town's existence; but this the average traveler, so familiar with water as, perhaps, to hold it in contempt, could not appreciate. An all-wise Providence had, deep down in the sand beneath the long legs of the tank, provided a spring of never-lacking quantity. One day there had cut the straight horizon a young man riding a burro. He wore laced boots, canvas breeches, and a blue-flannel shirt, and he was followed by a scant cavalcade of transit-bearers and chainmen, accompanied by a mule team trailing in its rear a water wagon. Quite by accident the subterranean flow was discovered, and on the blue print that he made the young man in the laced boots indicated its location by a white cross, having previously driven a stake. Later the route that he and his companions had traversed was followed by the construction gang, a motley concourse, composed in equal parts of silent-moving Apaches, loquacious Irish, shifty-eyed Italians, and chop-haired Hopis. Under their hands two threads of steel were laid across the sand, their ends pointing westward, ever westward, to the Sunset Sea. A pipe was sunk at the point marked by the stake; the flow was immediate and satisfactory. In a week the tank was up, painted, and deserted, while another gang ran a switch from the main line that ended at a bumper erected in the sand a hundred yards away. The red station followed, and the division superintendent, recalling his Arabian Nights, together with his first run over the new stretch of track, gave to it the name of Bagdad. After the red station—the town.

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In the beginning this had consisted of half a score adobe houses, low-roofed, and beamed with cottonwood, in the depressed, open, vestibules of which it was the habit of the ragged, grimy children of the place to play with the lean and hungry goats. Into the East, where the sheep ranges were, some word of Bagdad's birth had penetrated, and ere long the first sheepman came and made it his headquarters. Fearful, no doubt, that by this change of base the adventurer might reap benefits denied themselves the others followed. José Fernandez opened the original saloon; and that same night Jim Hawley dealt the first game of "bank" in Bagdad. A roulette wheel came as a matter of course. The town began to take thought of itself. A blond man with a staccato voice and a weak mustache came up from San Luis and opened a drug store. One day a dentist dropped from No. 5, East bound, and for a time operated in a tent. Jerry Rowley's department store, The Bon Marché sprang up overnight. Given such an impetus Bagdad thrived, until at the time with which this chronicle is concerned it consisted of thirty-two wooden structures—five of them saloons—facing Main Street; twice as many "residences"—half 'dobe—the red station with its cinder siding, and the water tank.

The reason for the Carter eating house, adjoining the station, was characteristic of the land and of the Carter System. One afternoon a cloud mischievously burst three miles to the Northeast. The resulting washout sufficed to hold up at Bagdad all East-going trains for a

period of eighteen hours. It proved a "banner day" for Rowley, proprietor of the Bon Marché, so far, at least, as the sale of "canned goods" was concerned. As the last train pulled out and crossed the hastily thrown up trestle of unbolted ties that a speedily assembled construction gang had erected across the newly made *arroyo*, Rowley surveyed his depleted stock and rubbed his hands.

"Couple o' more like that there," he is reported to have declared to José, "and I'll tear up here'n Bagdad and go back to Albykerk."

But it was not the inclination of the Carter System, operating in close connection with "the line," to permit resistlessly any encroachment upon its prerogatives. An eating house was forthwith established. It consisted of a red wing, tacked loosely to the red station, and possessing two real stories, an edifice at once effective and imposing in its simple dignity. The second floor was cut up and properly divided by partitions that did not touch the roof—this for purposes of ventilation—into six chambers, each equipped with an iron bed, one chair, and a washstand, all for the benefit of such weary wayfarers as might seek in Bagdad, of a night, the comforts of a Carter home. The ground floor was given over to a semi-circular lunch counter, supporting divers plates of chocolate cake, custard pie, and Fresno fruits, under glass globes, and four tables, always set and ready—for another washout. Rowley was the only man in Bagdad who regretted the establishment of the institution, and it is worthy of note that after its opening he was wont on

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occasion, and always with feeling, to refer to the railway as "that damn Octopus."

When all was ready Stevens, back in Kansas City, sent a telegram to Billy Thompson at Albuquerque, wherein the latter was ordered to proceed at once to Bagdad and put things into shipshape.

"Putting things into shipshape" whenever the Carter System saw fit to add another link to its long chain of desert eating houses was Billy Thompson's work; for five years before Sadie's appearance in the town it had been his work, and it promised to continue his work, as often he assured himself, until, like a sick coyote, he laid him down in the sand to die. And yet, in his heart of hearts, he would not have had it otherwise.

As related to his immediate environment, Billy Thompson was an anomaly. Whenever he chanced to be standing in front of the eating house as one of the long overland trains drew up, such of the passengers as glimpsed him felt for him a tender pity in their belief that he was a specimen of Eastern gentle birth fated to dwell on the edge of things for the good of his lungs. For Billy looked to be just that. His thirty-two years sat lightly upon him; on one or two occasions he had claimed twenty without an argument having ensued. His hair, originally brown and soft, had been bleached by the desert sun and the ever-present alkali to a streaky chestnut tone. His eyes were blue and clear, far-seeing eyes, like the eyes of an Indian in all save shade, and his long, smooth face was strangely pale save for the blotches of color upon his cheek bones. These touches of car-

mine in his invalid face were quite sufficient to establish him a "lunger" and really on his last legs, in the minds of the Pullman tourists.

In his clothes especially was he marked among his neighbors. His garments, all of them, smacked of the East—Chicago—whence originally he had come into the desert, though his young boyhood had been spent in a little Indiana town, close to the Illinois line. Among a people overly given, perhaps, to khaki pants, canvas leggings, corduroy, blue-flannel shirts, no coats, and high-crowned sombreros of Mexican grass, Billy bloomed in all the gaudy beauty of a waxen cactus blossom. In a temperature of one hundred and twelve degrees Fahrenheit he affected double-breasted coats of blue serge, light plaid trousers, low shoes, polka-dotted hose, shirts that for brilliancy easily surpassed a Germantown Navajo blanket, waistcoats of startling patterns, and a multitude of striped and speckled hat bands, worn—one at a time, it may be said in passing—around the low crown of his stiff-brimmed "straw."

When Skinny McGregor first came to town he gravitated naturally to Billy, and later it was Skinny who elicited from the former his reasons for garbing himself in a glory that was not Solomon's.

One morning Billy had slouched into the "Monte," Fernandez "place," to discover Skinny dusting the roulette wheel. At the time he was wearing certain garments that he had received the night before on No. 6, dead-headed through from Chicago.

At sight of his brilliant figure in the wide doorway

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little Skinny's eyes started from his head and he blinked. Then, dropping his chamois duster, he came nearer Billy and caressingly passed a hand over his person.

"Billy," he asked in his thin, frail, little voice, "what do you flash rags like them for out here, where there ain't nobody to see 'em but a bunch of greasers—where there ain't any real ladies that would appreciate 'em?"

"Don't forget the trains, Skinny," Billy had replied, "and that I've got the dignity of the System to uphold. I'll bet there's more capitalists dropped off the overlands here at Bagdad just from seein' me standing in front of the place, than for any other reason. I'm the card of this town, and don't think I don't know it. The minute I revert to jeans and soiled pyjamas on the street, like some blamed greaser, this metropolis fades from sight."

"I guess that's so, Billy," Skinny had agreed and gone back to his dusting.

"How's the wheel to-day?" Thompson asked.

Skinny winked. "'Bout the same; no improvement perceptible," he replied.

Billy pursed his lips, nodded, and went on up Main Street.

Indeed his present desert habitat was suggested in but one particular feature of his personal adornment. On the thumb of his left hand he wore a massive silver ring, set with a huge native turquoise in a fan-shaped shield. To quote Skinny, it looked "like a robin's egg on a platter," but Billy was proud of it. He had hired a Navajo silversmith to hammer it out of a silver dollar

and had given him the balance of five dollars for the turquoise and his work.

"You see," he explained one day to McGregor as he stood in front of the wheel and idly shot the little ball around the rim, "you see, Skinny, the reason I sport the dog collar on me is this: I hate the damn country and don't want to be taken for a native. That's why I get my clothes back in Chicago. They're about two years overdue in Chi. I suppose, but they're ten years ahead of Bagdad. They ain't through wearing spring-bottom pants here yet, you know. Now, wearing my clothes, it would be reasonable to take me for a tender-foot if I didn't carry a sign. That ring's the sign." He held up his thumb and studied the circlet in the brilliant light admiringly. "If it wasn't for that ring every tin horn that drifts down here from the up-country would take me for one of those rah-rah boys back East and wouldn't be able to get a night's rest till he'd trimmed me. The reason I wear it on my thumb is because the blamed Navajo that made it had a third finger like a dill pickle and fitted it to his own instead of mine. I hol-lered when he brought it 'round, but he wouldn't change it. Seems it has something to do with their religion; if he'd made it smaller after it was all done, one of his sun gods might have reared up and soaked him. Is your mind easier, Skinny?"

McGregor coughed and confessed that it was.

It was Billy's frank custom to express, with such naïve disregard of the conventions, his scorn of Bagdad, indeed of all the desert country round about.

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"Look at it!" he exclaimed one day to Jerry Rowley as they stood together in front of the latter's emporium. "Look at it! Ain't it a peach? Say, this town's a joke. Look at that vista!" Jerry wiped his bleary eyes with the back of a hand covered with a fell of reddish hair, and stared.

"What's the matter of it?" he inquired, steadying himself.

"Can't you see the goats? Think a live town'd let goats own it? Think a self-respecting people would let those blamed greasers keep a-sitting on the town site like a lot of bloomin' paper weights? You'll notice there ain't any more ornamenting the front of the eating house. Charley dropped a pan of boiling water on six of 'em last Thursday night and they've been scarcer than hen's teeth ever since."

Rowley scowled. "Town was all right till the damn Octopus got a strangle hold on it," he grunted.

"Never going to forget that wash-out, are you, Jerry?" Billy inquired blandly. "Fine for the goats after that, wasn't it? Had all the tomato and salmon cans they could hold, didn't they? Yes, sir, this is a great town!"

Whereupon Billy left Jerry, dazed and spluttering, in front of the Bon Marché and entered the Always Open Drug Store on the corner.

He had in the beginning quitted Albuquerque regretfully, with his brass-bound steamer trunk, and each report that he made to Stevens thereafter from the new station carried, subjoined, a personal note wherein he

jeered blithely at the System for having seen fit to establish what he called "an ice-cream stand on the rim of hell." But whenever there came a reply, as there usually did, conveying a hint that before long he might expect to receive a transfer, he would make haste to write the office that things weren't going so very well and that he "supposed" he'd better stay on a while longer. His greatest cause for distress, however, lay in the fact that thus far all the girls sent out to him to assist in serving the occasional washed-out train load speedily married, or as speedily sickened of the desert and *vamosed*. Indeed there was but little in Bagdad, apart from certain eligible specimens of bewhiskered masculinity, to hold the feminine interest. Women, that is to say, women available in matters of social intercourse, were not a drug on the local market, though of the commoner or garden variety, there was the usual supply.

Two days before Sadie's call at the office of the superintendent, Stevens had received a personal and characteristic letter from Billy in which the latter said:

"For Heaven's sake send me another girl—a live one. The last love-sick ex-schoolm'am eloped with a sheepman from over East and the cook's talking about going on strike. See if you can't find a girl that just loves hot weather. The glass out in front has hovered around one hundred and thirteen for the past three weeks, and it's fine and mellow. Send one that's had her troubles and wants to forget the busy marts of trade and the clang of trolley cars. That's about the only variety we haven't tried. I suppose trolley cars clang, don't they? It's so

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long since I've seen one I can't remember exactly. And whatever else you do, send one that runs when she sees a man. That's been mostly the trouble with the last five, that and the thermometer. Girls down here at the edge of hell aren't what you'd call plentiful, quite, and every time one appears, a suitor jumps out from behind a cactus and tries to annex her. Send a girl with a frosty face and an icy mitt that hates men—that is, the breed of men that trail down here. One that can draw herself to her full height like Mrs. Leslie Carter and say 'Sir!' so contemptuous that the guy in front all crinkles up like a piece of rawhide in the sun. That's the kind!"

And so it was that on the morning after Sadie's call upon him, Stevens sent this wire to Thompson:

"A human iceberg that is also a willing worker left on No. 8 last night. Name is Sadie Morrison. Look out for her Monday."

And so it was that as the brazen sun swung low in the cloudless sky on the following Monday noon, Billy Thompson in a fresh pair of plaid flannel trousers, his double-breasted blue-serge coat buttoned closely about his slight figure, and wearing around his hat crown the most brilliant band in all his large collection, awaited Sadie's coming, under the thermometer, in front of the red eating house, with Charley, the white-capped cook, and Harry Robinson, the operator, serving as buttresses on either side.

CHAPTER IV

THE ADVENT OF SADIE

SADIE'S coming into the desert was heralded by no fanfare of trumpets. Indeed, as the long train came to a standstill before the red station and each member of the self-constituted committee of welcome turned his eyes in the direction of the standard Pullmans ahead, they were of the unanimous opinion that an error had been made by Stevens. However, they saw a tin-bound, round-top trunk lowered to the cinder siding from the wide door of the baggage car and that same instant Sadie herself descended from the rear platform of the last "tourist sleeper." She was preceded by a ruddy-faced individual wearing a drooping mustache and a broad brimmed Stetson, who set her imitation leather suit case on the siding, and helped her down. Then he lifted the case for her, and as she took it, smiling her gratitude, he swept off his hat, with a gesture of marked grandeur, and bowed. Not one of the committee had witnessed the little scene, and as the train pulled out Sadie stood there doubtfully. Turning, Thompson saw her and came forward rapidly.

"Is this Miss Morrison?" he inquired.

"Yes, I'm Sadie Morrison. I guess Mr. Stevens wired, didn't he?"

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At a glance the manager had noted every detail of her appearance, from her pompadour to the toes of her russet shoes.

The cook and Robinson had hung back, but now they approached together and Robinson asked if that were Sadie's trunk which stood on one end a little way up the siding. At her answer that it was they laid violent hands upon it and carried it forward between them.

"My, it's a long way out here, ain't it?" exclaimed Sadie as Thompson led the way into the lunch room.

"It is something of a jaunt," he replied. "I suppose you want to go right up to your room, don't you? I'll show it to you."

He started to ascend the narrow stairs behind the counter.

"Wait a minute," she called to him; "I'll help carry my trunk up."

"You!" Billy exploded.

"Sure," she replied.

"You won't do anything of the sort," he declared. "Charley and Robinson want to. Let 'em. It'll do 'em good."

"Oh, all right, if you say so," Sadie acquiesced as she followed Billy up the stairs.

In her room she glanced about her; then she looked at the young man and smiled.

"This ain't a palace, you know," he declared intuitively.

"I'm glad it ain't," was her reply; "I ain't used to palaces."

Sadie

"You'll find water in the pitcher," he informed her, "and if you want any more nails to hang your things on, tell Charley—he's the cook—and he'll drive 'em for you. Here's your trunk."

"Set it over there, will you, by the wash-stand?" She indicated with a gesture the desired location.

Billy formally introduced the cook and the operator then and they both nodded, grinning.

"Glad to meet you," Sadie said, and held out her hand, first to Charley, then to Robinson.

"Come down when you get washed up," Billy said, "and I'll try to elucidate the job that's cut out for you in this seething maelstrom of metropolitan life. You won't get thin holding it down, I guess."

So saying he left her, following in the wake of the cook.

In the lunch room below the three men gazed into one another's faces, but it was Billy who spoke as he slowly rolled a cigarette.

"Did you see her?" he inquired significantly. "Did you *see* her? Say"—he bent the end of his cigarette—"this caravanserie's going to sit up and take notice from now on."

"Ain't she a peach?" murmured Robinson, more, however, as a declaration than as an interrogation.

"Some," agreed the cook as he vanished through the narrow doorway under the stairs into what Billy was wont to call his kennel. Robinson without further comment returned to his office where for two hours he sat staring through the little panes of his bow window,

The Advent of Sadie

and Billy was left alone on the siding to trim his finger nails.

Ten minutes later the little door under the stairs was pushed back and the head of the cook appeared.

"Sssssss!" he hissed. Thompson turned. Charley wriggled a crooked forefinger. "Come on out here," he whispered. Billy closed his knife and tiptoed noiselessly across the lunch-room floor.

"What's the matter?" he inquired under his breath.

Charley made no reply and Thompson followed him into the kitchen.

"Listen!" The cook lifted a silencing hand.

Above, Sadie was singing, low, to herself, in a voice possessing many velvety baritone qualities.

"Listen, ain't it great!" whispered the cook, and Billy Thompson grinned.

The song that she was singing seemed to begin:

"He don't belong to the re-gu-lars,
He's just a volunteer;
Dum-di-diddledy-dum-di-dum,
But some one holds him dear,"

and as she sang their heads wagged in time to the air.

Presently the singing ceased and Billy returned to the lunch room, where, seating himself at one of the tables by a window, he tried to interest himself in a week-old-copy of the *San Francisco Examiner*.

From above came the sound of Sadie's footfalls as she moved about the little, bare room, hanging her things on the nails driven along the wall at the foot of the

Sadie

white, iron bed. The one window of the room looked out upon Main Street. She saw the deep ruts made by the great borax wagons that thrice weekly passed through the town on the way to San Luis, where the refinery was. In the distance she heard the tinkle of a bell and listened. Down the dusty way such an outfit was coming now. The bell hung at the neck of the off lead mule. She counted the animals; there were twenty of them, and on the back of a wheeler sat a man, one leg thrown over the collar, as women are wont to ride. In his hands he clutched a single rein, that, passing under the bridles of every animal, was caught at the bit of the leader with the bell. Above the driver towered the huge wagon, and on behind trailed the green water tank. The tank appeared familiar to Sadie; she recalled having many times seen others like it in the streets of Kansas City. And she wondered to what use *oil* in such quantities could be put in the desert! The borax outfit passed; again in the distance she heard the tinkle of the bell, fainter and fainter, on the dust-shot air.

Across the street the wavy glass in the window of Rowley's Bon Marché glared in the dazzling light. An Indian rode up to the paling and dismounted from his burro; immediately the little animal lay down in the sand, as if tired; and she saw the rider disappear through the open doorway of the store. Turning from the window then, she gave a last glance about her, smiled, and descended the stairs into the lunch room.

Billy tossed aside his paper and pushing forth a chair said:

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"Sit down and I'll try to tell you what you're up against."

She seated herself opposite him, her elbows on the table, her chin on the little platform her clasped hands made.

"Fire away," she said.

"Well, in the first place this is the only hotel in town. There's a few that have their meals here off and on, but mostly we catch the up-country prospectors and the sheepmen from over East. We don't have anybody for all night often. Generally the train people are fed forty miles West of here. It's only when something happens on the line like a freight wreck, or a washout, or a sand storm that we have a rush. This is a sort of emergency station, you know. Sometimes we have to hustle, but ordinarily we loaf. Of course, there's the place to take care of, apart from the dining room; you'll be the housekeeper, like. See? You don't need to be skairt; the work won't kill you. Now I'll show you where the things are."

Her first lesson in the proper conduct of a Carter eating house of the third class lasted about an hour, during which the manager made out for her a revised price list of the "dairy dishes," served from the counter, as distinct from the "regular meals." Sadie made a mental comparison of the prices charged here in the desert and in Kelsey's, and remarked that she had never heard of doughnuts being sold "three for five" before.

"If the System wasn't operated in such close connection with the line," Thompson told her, "we couldn't

Sadie

do it. You see all the bulk stuff we use comes through from Kansas City or 'Frisco, dead-head. The hungry travelin' public gets the benefit, that's all. We've been sorter expecting a hotel to be opened here for the past year. Fellow by the name of Tunnison that has The Palace up at Cottonwood was down looking the ground over, but his wife died a couple of weeks later and he gipped. There'll be one some day, though, when the gold begins to attract folks to the Valley up North."

The System, as the manager explained it, was quite simple to Sadie and she asked but few questions.

"I guess you won't have any trouble," Thompson declared. "What the devil's that!" he exclaimed with his next breath. A great clamor and a multitude of clashing cries were borne to them where they stood. Thompson ran forth into the sun glare without his hat.

"Come out here!" Sadie heard his call and joined him at the end of the red station. "That'll show you how the noble red man has fallen," he indicated, laughing.

What she beheld caused all the sympathy she was capable of feeling to beat big in her heart. On his burro, yelling in drunken scorn of the pitiless sun that shone relentlessly down upon his tousled head, swayed the Indian that an hour before she had seen quietly enter the Bon Marché. A score of little Mexicans were goading animal and rider almost to a frenzy, the while in front of his emporium stood Rowley himself, holding his fat sides in laughter.

Upon the impulse of the moment Sadie acted. Almost before Thompson realized her intent she had plunged

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fearlessly into the midst of the howling, jeering mob of ragged childhood and was cuffing the youngsters right and left.

In frightened amazement they shrank before her onslaught, and in the new excitement of the moment the Indian's knowing burro carried his drunken master beyond the bounds of further baiting.

At Sadie's sudden appearance upon the scene of his delight Rowley's face underwent a series of illuminating changes; wonder gave way to anger which in turn was displaced by an expression of dubious admiration. The effect upon Skinny McGregor, who witnessed the little drama from the doorway of the Always Open Drug Store, was quite different. Perceiving at once the girl's intent, a regard for the fundamental decencies latent in him came to the surface, and squatting with his hands on his knees he cried out to Sansome, the druggist:

"By golly, that dame's on the level! But she's a tenderfoot. Gawd, what a tenderfoot!"

"Who'n thunder is she?" Sansome asked.

"I dunno," little Skinny replied, "but I guess she's the new girl over't the eating house. Thompson said he expected one to-day."

Sadie, having accomplished her self-appointed task, joined the manager where she had left him, at the end of the station, and from which point he had not moved.

"That was a good job," was all he said as he permitted his eyes to rest admiringly, for a moment, upon her flushed face.

Sadie

She smiled. "The miserable brats!" she muttered. "I thought there was a law against selling it to Indians."

Thompson regarded her with a new and curious interest.

"I guess there is," was his dry reply, "but it ain't got out here yet. Besides, the cigar sign wasn't full of booze, likely."

"Wasn't!" Sadie stared at him.

Thompson shook his head. "More apt to have been Stomach Bitters or something like that."

He had nothing further to say to her just then, but it was clear to him where his duty lay. She must be instructed in the ways of her adopted land if she would live at peace with the world about her, he decided. But how to make the matter clear to her, he was at a loss to know.

Nor did she refer to the incident again that afternoon. Indeed, on her return to the eating house, she immediately joined the cook in the kitchen and for the first time in three weeks Thompson, Skinny McGregor, Robinson, and Sansome the druggist, comprising the four "regular boarders," were "decently served," as Billy observed when Sadie went back into the kitchen for a second order of dessert.

"Think you're going to like it out here?" Charley the cook inquired, as he cleared a place for her at one end of the serving table.

"Sure, I'm going to like it," she replied. "It's different."

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"Think you can stand the heat?" he pursued solicitously.

"I can stand anything," she informed him decisively. "Anything but fools and—most women."

Whereat Charley grinned, and agreed, sententiously, regarding her from the end of an eye:

"So c'n I."

CHAPTER V

BILLY THOMPSON DISSERTATES

BILLY THOMPSON and the cook sat just outside the door of the lunch room, on chairs tilted back against the red wall, watching the sunset glow in the Western sky. The evening breeze was rising. Off to the East the purple shadows were lengthening. The cacti, lifting their imploring fingers to the unflecked dome, were growing less and less distinct against the deepening background of the sand.

"Do you think she'll make good?" Charley inquired, apropos of nothing, but with obvious reference to Sadie.

"Who? Her?" Billy replied. "Can't tell yet. She ain't been here long enough. Depends upon how she takes to the country. Funny about the women from back East—Kansas City or Chicago—when they hit these parts. Seems to sorter daze 'em. They get loco."

"I've noticed it," agreed Charley dryly.

"They'll be all right for a while," Thompson continued, "then all of a sudden they kick up. Might as well let 'em slide then. Can't ever break 'em to harness again. Mebbe it's the heat; I don't know."

"I was asking her this afternoon if she thought she could stand it," Charley put in.

"What'd she say?"

Billy Thompson Dissertates

"Said she guessed she could."

"Well, Kansas City ain't what you'd call arctic in the summer," Billy observed.

"She'll be getting married just about the time she's well broke in," was the gloomy prophecy of the cook.

Billy twisted in his chair. "Don't talk about it," he pleaded.

Charley rose at that and yawned. "Well," he drawled, "guess I'll take a little walk over town."

For a space Billy Thompson stared at the bow on one of his low shoes. It was at such moments as now, when the shadows of evening thickened around him, that a longing for the soil "back East" crept into his heart. For ten years the desert had been his home; he knew the changing land in all its multitude of moods; he knew how little he was in it; how profitless the work that he was doing. Whenever a prospector came down from the North with some wild tale of the Eldorado claim that he had located, Billy Thompson was impelled, for the little moment, to go forth himself in quest of the gold that he knew lay, to all intents and purposes, beneath his hand. Confident, however, that sooner or later a "rush" to the desert fields would occur he held back, promising himself that when it should it would find him ready. In a word the laziness of the life he had led so long, the laziness of the desert dozing round about him, held him to his comfortable, if narrow, niche in the Carter System.

His gloomy reverie was broken suddenly by the appearance of Sadie in the doorway.

"Come out and sit down on the porch," he invited.

"I thought Charley was here," she replied, sinking upon the chair the cook had vacated, and smoothing out her white duck skirt.

"He just left," he informed her; "he heard the wheel over at the 'Monte' and couldn't resist. That's the trouble with Charley," he added; "he knows the wheel down there's on the bum and he's been bucking it all summer trying to find out what ails it."

"What kind of a wheel is it?" Sadie inquired ingenuously.

Billy regarded her from the corner of his eye. "What *kind* of a wheel!" he exclaimed. "A *roulette* wheel; did you think I meant a little girl's *tricycle* wheel?"

"I didn't know," was the apologetic response. Then: "Is it really on the bum?" she asked.

"Rather." Billy flicked the ash from his cigarette and leaned back into his chair, swinging his feet. "Skinny McGregor—he's the little lad that operates it—put me wise two months ago. The least pressure at a certain point on the rim springs it proper."

Sadie's sole desire at the moment was to facilitate conversation, so she asked naïvely: "Why don't they get it fixed if it's bu'sted?"

"That's what I wanted to know," Billy replied. "I asked Skinny once and he 'lowed old Fernandez—that's the proprietor—said it made good, enough to suit him, and as long as Skinny knew how to operate it *right* he didn't see the use of laying out three or four hundred for a new one. Thought I might as well tell you"—he

Billy Thompson Dissertates

chuckled—"in case you should ever feel like going against it yourself."

Sadie smiled. "I'm much obliged," she said, "but I guess that ain't for mine."

A period of silence ensued during which Billy rolled a fresh cigarette and Sadie gazed at the purpling sky.

"That was a pretty nervy thing you did this afternoon," he declared irrelevantly.

"What?" she asked.

"Swatting those greaser kids that were pestering the cigar sign."

"Oh!" She had hoped he would not refer to the incident.

"Only it's a little unusual out here for white folks to rush to the assistance of the noble red man, drunk or sober—the red man I mean—like you did. You see, out here an Indian is just an Indian as long as he's on top of the ground; when he's under, he's a good Indian. Just thought I'd put you wise. Not that it makes any difference, you know, only we have to conform to the habits of the natives as much as possible. It prevents trouble, you see. I guess Stevens didn't tell you much about Bagdad, did he?" he added.

The color had come into Sadie's face, but in the lessening light he could not perceive it.

"He didn't have time to tell me much," she confessed. "I came right off the bat."

"Well, it ain't so bad, as these desert towns go," Billy ran on.

Sadie turned toward him. "Who was that old fat

fellow that laughed so hard this afternoon?" she inquired eagerly. "I could have hit him!"

"Him? Oh, that was Jerry Rowley. He's the sole owner and proprietor of the Bon Marché, next to the Always Open, over on Main Street. They call it the Bun March around here. Jerry's all right in his way. If you were to ask Skinny McGregor about him he'd tell you different, but that's because Jerry made a pass to plug Skinny one night in the 'Monte,' couple of months ago. Trouble with Rowley is, he's spent the greater part of his life cultivating a taste for red-eye and for the last few years he's been harvesting the crop. If you ever get a whiff of something that you can't quite identify, but that kind of reminds you of a chafing dish—that's Jerry.

Sadie laughed.

"Whenever he smokes he lights up with a burning glass; he's afraid to hold a match so close to his breath."

"Where did he come from? He didn't grow out here, did he?" she asked.

Billy drew a mouthful of smoke into his leathern lungs and exhaled it in two funnel-shaped spirals through dilated nostrils.

"Him? No; he moved in. Came from New Mexico originally. He's been an Indian trader ever since he was a kid. Half of the old junk you see back East that looks Southwesterny Jerry gathered in. He can tell a genuine Hopi prayer stick from an imitation with his eyes shut and both hands tied behind him. You ought

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to hear him reminisce about his troubles with the Yaquis down in Sonora. According to him he cleansed the whole province and they've been plowing up shin bones, and ears, and fingers, and things that he scattered, ever since. He's got another story about how he broke a strike on the Southern Pacific, and licked, single-handed, three or four hunderd Apaches and dagoes, that's a pretty parlor anecdote—only it's a lie. The man who really did it died down in San Luis eight years ago and since then Jerry's been telling the story on himself. When the tourists with the green sun specs began to stop off here and do a little bartering with the Indians on their own account, Jerry tried to get a friend of his back in Nebraska to introduce a bill in Congress prohibiting all trading with reservation Indians except by licensed traders. He used to cry when he got started talking about the mean advantage the tourists were taking of the noble red man's childish innocence. Fact is, Jerry saw that the cigar signs were getting wise and it disturbed him. By and by the real intrinsic value of his customary articles of barter—beads, wooden dumb-bells, little advertising mirrors, and canned salmon that required all the disinfectants in the territory to change its character—began to percolate the coagulated gray matter of the aborigines. When times got so rotten that Jerry couldn't trade a two-ounce box of musk-scented vase-line for a Navajo blanket worth three hundred, American, he went out of business. And every time he takes on a load now he starts off sobbing about the commercial degradation of the native tribes, and the degeneration

of their once artistic handicrafts. Jerry's a sort of a shine; he really ought to have passed in his checks before the first railroad tapped this country."

"I see," murmured Sadie; but she did not, quite.

"Since then," Billy pursued, "he's been running the Bun March and doing what trading comes his way on the side. His house is right over there; there's usually four or five goats out in front. He's got a Mexican woman taking care of things for him."

"He isn't married then," observed Sadie casually.

Billy turned, and for an instant studied her profile in the waning light.

"No, he ain't married," he replied dryly. "I heard once that he proposed to a squaw somewhere up around Cottonwood, but she told him she wouldn't be his unless he gave her the eight dollars he'd swindled her fourth husband out of on a trade for a beaded shirt. Jerry, it appears, couldn't quite see it that way, so the affair fell through."

"Wasn't she worth eight dollars?" murmured Sadie wonderingly.

"Not to Jerry, I guess," Billy replied.

"But most of the men out here *are* married, aren't they?" she urged blandly.

"Some of 'em are," was Billy's sour response. He was conscious that the conversation was approaching dangerous ground. "The rest would be, maybe, if there were enough of the opposite sex to go round. Say!" he exploded, "you haven't got the marrying idea in your head *this* quick, have you?"

Billy Thompson Dissertates

She laughed. "Don't lose any sleep about me," she replied.

"That's what happened to all the others, you know," he went on, "and I was getting desperate. Just about the time a girl would begin to feel at home around the place, some wild-eyed sheepman or other, in khaki pants and a blue shirt, would hop out from behind a Spanish bayonet and carry her off. Charley and I've got lame arms from throwing rice!"

"You won't have to throw any at me," Sadie assured him.

"I don't suppose you'd like to promise that, would you?" There was a note of eager plea in his voice and he leaned over toward her so far that she felt his breath on her cheek.

"I'd just as soon, if it would make you feel any easier," she told him.

"Well, it would!" he declared.

"All right then; I promise." She laughed. As for Billy Thompson he pulled a deep breath and sighed contentedly.

"I've never been able to account for it," he ran on. "Mostly, these fellows out here are a lot of dubs. What a girl can discover that's romantic in living in a 'dobe, and doing the washing for a set of whiskers with a man behind 'em that eats with his knife, I can't see. The funny part of it is, that every one of 'em that's had a shot at it down here could have found better picking back where she came from."

"Maybe it's in the air," Sadie suggested.

"I guess it must be," Billy agreed dubiously. "If things were like they used to be it wouldn't be so hard to explain. If the guys round here wore velvet pants, and elk-tooth buttons, and buckskin shirts with fringe on 'em, and let their manes grow long and glossy like the old Indian doctor that I used to see back in my home town in Indiana, with Kickapoo medicine outfits, why, there'd be some reason for it. But if you can indicate to me anything romantic, and appealing to the normal human emotions, in a man who wears a straw hat like the leaning tower of Pisa, and a pyjama coat and linen pants, and comes barefoot into town for his bacon and beans straddling a burro that wouldn't weigh in sixty-five pounds on the hoof, I wish you would. And as for the old picturesque life with guns barking all night, and sheriffs making heroes of themselves so fast they don't have time to eat at a table—it's gone, all gone. Once in a while a cow-puncher or a sheep trailer like Reddy Lawton, or maybe a bunch of 'em come in and imagine they've been elected absorbing secretaries of the liquor consumers' league; and after trying to drown themselves in cocktails composed of equal parts of fusel oil and sulphuric acid served in a lemonade glass, take a shot or two, in passing, at the jars of colored water in the window of the Always Open Drug Store; or maybe a *posse* of the Protective Association tears through town on the trail of a horse thief; or a greaser gets killed as the result of the accidental discharge of a gun in the hands of a white man; or somebody hits a Chinaman with a hatchet; or Jerry Rowley sells half a dozen bottles of

Billy Thompson Dissertates

Peruna to an Indian—that's all that ever happens here. Otherwise the town's as calm and quiet as a deaf-mute camp meeting. You see it's so blamed hot down here folks don't like to take the trouble of scrapping. If you happen to see a man on the street with a gun hanging against his leg don't make the mistake of thinking he's a bad one. Probably he hasn't used that gun for five years except to drive tacks with. Of course if they hit the gold good and hard up North a ways, there'll likely be something doing to break the monotony. It's what we're all waiting for. There's a road coming down west of the Valley and Bagdad's the natural gateway at this end. It's bound to happen sooner or later, but just when, nobody knows."

Billy rose.

"Well," he concluded, "I guess I'll take a little walk over town myself—and see how much Charley has lost. Go to bed whenever you want to. There's nothing to be afraid of. And you needn't bother to put your window down," he assured her. "It only rains out here once in fourteen years and we had a shower last August. Good-night."

In the ghost light she followed his slight figure with her smiling eyes, as he walked away, down the siding, and when he had disappeared she did not move. Passively she permitted herself to be wooed by the magic of the silent desert night.

CHAPTER VI

A DESERT CAVALIER

ONE by one the stars came out, low-hanging from the purple sky; glittering, and cold as frost points. To Sadie, sitting alone in front of the eating house, it seemed that by lifting her hand she might almost brush them from the air above her head. Through the window at her side, and the open door beyond, the yellow light within cast paths of radiance across the cinder siding, and where a vagrant ray touched upon the burnished rails they glimmered luminously.

She faced a vast silence. Out there, across the tracks, she knew the desert lay; an endless sweep of sand, a weird and mystic land whose menace would, ere long, be given her to feel. In her own loneliness, surrounded by the silence of the purple night, she sensed a subtle harmony between the spirit of herself and the conscious spirit of the sea of sand—out yonder. Some day, perhaps, after a long time, she told herself, she might learn to know the desert's shifting moods as they came and went; but now it was the frost light of the close and glittering stars that charmed her.

Little meaningless incidents of her life—back home—crept, one by one, across her memory. She wondered

A Desert Cavalier

what Grace and Frances were doing now, while she sat here in the stillness. On her fingers she counted the days that had elapsed since she bade them good-by at Kelsey's. To-night was their night off; it would be hers, too, if she were there with them, instead of here hundreds of miles away. Maybe they were listening to the band out in Chelsea Park. . . . Then she thought of Lacy and shivered. . . . Perhaps she had treated him cruelly after all. . . . Perhaps, if she had given him a chance, he might have been able to explain. As had been her untrained habit for as far back as she could remember, she had acted with him upon the impulse of the moment. When but a little girl, playing in front of the house on a dingy street in Armourdale, even before the terrible day on which her father was brought home dead from the stock-yards, she had been notorious among the mothers of the neighborhood for her headstrong wilfulness. Never having felt her own mother's guiding or restraining hand, she had grown up wild, like the chickweed on the commons across the way. Yet, even then, as now, hers was the portion of labor.

She asked herself if she would ever learn to love the land out here, as she had loved the dirty streets and hills of home. Thus far her knowledge of it was the knowledge gained in a single, uneventful day. The little incidents of the afternoon loomed big to her now, in the silence; her meeting with Thompson; their talk in the lunch room, and again this evening; the affair of the drunken Indian. She had clearly understood his reproof

Sadie

of her action; and she made a bold promise that henceforth she would restrain herself and let the conduct of those about her serve as model for her own. At least, here in the desert was peace. With a little sigh she leaned back in the chair and closing her eyes, shut out the frost beams of the glittering stars.

Suddenly she was startled by the crunch of a heavy tread on the cinders at the end of the building. A tremor of fear passed over her, but before she could cry out, a shadow crept around the corner of the station. Dumb with fright she waited, huddled in the chair. Then in the path of yellow light the shadow took form and substance and she saw that it was Rowley. A breath of deep relief escaped her.

Rowley was arrayed in what every resident of Bagdad would have at once recognized as his holiday garments; a suit of dusty gray; the coat open and revealing a wide expanse of linen vest, in the "V" at the throat of which was disclosed a wedge of flannel shirt, garnished with a flowing yellow scarf. Rowley's condition, moreover—a condition, it may be called, of unsteadiness—would have indicated to anyone but Sadie, his mood; a mood at once amiable and amorous.

"Good evenin'," he gurgled throatily, removing his sombrero with the gesture of a cavalier.

Sadie managed to voice a weak echo of the salutation.

"'S Mister Tho'son round—about?" he inquired blandly, seating himself, unsteadily, on the edge of the vacant chair beside her.

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Sadie's first impulse was to gather up her skirts and flee, but Rowley's exaggerated courtesy, and the oozy softness of his manner served to dissipate the fear that she at first had felt. She hesitated an instant, then lied, bravely:

"Yes, sir. He just went upstairs to—to lay down a little while. He said he had a—a headache!"

Rowley coughed. "'S too bad," he mumbled and settled his unwieldy bulk more stably in the chair.

"'S pleasant—evenin'," he ventured, passing the back of one hand across his mouth and hiccupping.

"Very," was Sadie's terse agreement.

"S-s-some cooler. Hun'red six-w'en I left—Bun March."

"I thought there was a chill in the air," Sadie observed, and looked away that he might not see the laughter dancing in her eyes. So far, however, as Rowley's ocular accuracy was concerned she might as well have been three girls.

"C-c-connected with—eatin' house?"

"Yes, I just came to-day," she informed him.

"So?" Rowley nodded, and removing his sombrero placed it carefully upon his knees. He hiccupped violently. "P-p-p-pleasant evenin'—some cooler."

The last vestige of Sadie's first fear had fled by now and in its place there arose a livery interest in him who, obviously, had come to call upon her.

"C-c-cur'ous thing—'bout the desert," he gurgled. "Hot-hot as 'tis, you—you never sweat!"

Under other circumstances, as Sadie told Billy

Sadie

Thompson afterwards, she would have "jumped up and down and screamed," but as it was she replied, sweetly, "Is that so?"

Rowley nodded and pursed his lips.

"C-c-cur'ous thing," he repeated insistently, "nev—never sweat!" His chin dropped upon his breast, but with an effort he pulled himself together. "S'cuse me," he muttered, shifting his position laboriously. "Y'see," he made to explain, "'course you—you sweat—same's anywhere. Bu' down here, the sun's so-so damn hot it—it 'vaporates—off'n you—'fore you know it. See? 'N' you think you—you don't sweat 't all. 'N' 't makes you—makes you cool—also!"

Trembling with smothered laughter Sadie replied breathlessly: "That's funny, ain't it?"

"M-m-mos' cur'ous thing," Rowley mumbled dozily.

A period of silence ensued during which Sadie sought to fortify herself for his next assault upon her risibilities. She had not long to wait. As if he had forgotten to declare himself and his intentions until now, Rowley suddenly announced:

"M-m-m'name's Rowley—J. R. Rowley—'M the pro-'m the propri'tor the Bun March!"

"Yes. I know, Mr. Rowley," Sadie replied. "Mr. Thompson told me this afternoon."

Immediately the Bun March's worthy proprietor launched upon a wobbly eulogy of Billy, followed by an equally wobbly tirade directed against what he chose to term "the Rai'way Octopus."

"But it ain'—it ain' that, lady." Turning his head

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he studied Sadie's profile a moment with eyes that refused to focus, and huskily inquired: "Wha' did you say your—your name mi' be?"

"Sadie Morrison," she told him.

"Yes—tha's so." He nodded. "But it ain' that, Madam—Madam Mor'son that—I come to talk 'bout this—this evenin'. Itsh 'n entirely—entirely dif'runt matter. 'Refer to the li'l episode—occurred thi' safternoon—in Main Street—front Bun March—in which—in—which a—a—a 'toxicated Injun—figgered—madam." He stopped and passed an unsteady hand over the dented crown of his hat where it lay on his knee. Sadie dared not trust her voice.

Hiccoughing at intervals Rowley continued in low, halting sentences of studied verbiage:

"I—I seen wha' you done an'—an' it's a' right; a' right. Wha' oughta been—been done—ten—ten years 'go. All the greas—greaser kids in Ba'dad ain'—ain' worth the powder—take to—to blow 'em up! S'cuse me. Done jus' right."

"The kids weren't to blame," was Sadie's spirited retort. "But the man that sold the Indian the stuff; he's the one."

The words had sprung of their own accord from her lips; fearfully she awaited the effect upon the not guiltless Rowley.

For a moment he studied the crown of his hat.

"Tha' too bad," he muttered, "too bad. 'S all right—though; 's all right. He got it off'n—off'n me; 's all right. Said a snake'd bit him. How's I to know?"

Huh? How's I to know w'en said snake'd bit him. Couldn't have him—him dyin'—in Bun March—snake bite. Could I—madam? Say, could I? Tha's what I come—come over to 'splain. Jerry Rowley ain'—ain' got nothin' 'gainst Injuns. I—I—I know lots Injuns. Frien's o' mine—lots of 'em—frien's o' mine. Used to trade—trade with 'em. No good—now; demor-demoral—demoralized! All of 'em demor—demor'ized. No good. Tourists—tourists done it. On'y time ever had any—any thouble wiv' 'em once—once down—Sonora. More'n millyuntook—took after me; me'n'—m' pardner. Bu' we—we done 'em up; me 'n' m'—pardner. Done 'em up good—me 'n' him. Killed ev'ry—ev'ry damn one of 'em. 'N' all we had—me 'n' m' pardner—was a couple—couple ol' old-fashioned—cav'lry colts. Never—never see such killin'. Folks down—down there was trippin'—trippin' over dead Injuns fer—fer months. But them—them Yaquis ain'—ain' real Injuns. Dah! Jes' bugs!"

Again he fell silent, and Sadie, opportunely, indulged in a spasm of coughing.

"Country ain'—ain' what used to be," he resumed presently. "All gone t' hell—s'cuse me. 'Member time all man's—man's life worth—come out—out here. Ever hear 'bout me—me settlin' strike down—Southern Pacific? Huh? Ain' many fellers done—w'at I—I done! Stood up'n front more'n—more'n five hund'ed 'Paches and Eyetalians wi' nothin'—nothin' but old six-shooter. Tol' 'em what's what! Trouble all settled—no more—after that. Ask anybody—down round Tombstone—'f they

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ever heard—ever heard o' Jerry Rowley. See what—they say. I'm—I'm 'n old-timer 'n this country, I am. Can't tell Jerry Rowley anythin'—anythin' 'bout this country. No, sir. First white man't ever—ever saw a snake dance—over't Oraibi—I was. Ask—anybody. I been out here—out here s' long ev'ry horned toad 'n the desert—knows me."

Rolling about in his chair he chuckled bibulously.

"You must have seen a good many changes," Sadie chanced, biting her lips.

"Huh? Changes? Should say—I had. Say"—he leaned toward her and his voice took on a note of mysterious confidence—"Say, nex' time—dance down't San Luis—wan' t' go?"

"Oh, Mr. Rowley!" Sadie exclaimed. "I couldn't I—I—I couldn't get away."

He waved his hand. "Leave t' me," he proposed grandly. "Leave 't all to me. I know—Billy Thompson. I'll fix it. Billy'd do anythin'—fer me. You leave 't all to me. Fine dances—down't San Luis. Fine! Sometimes—greaser gits killed, but"—he made another gesture of contemptuous indifference—"fine dances. Leave 't all to me. Drive over'n buckboard—fine drive. Leave it to—to me. I'll fix it."

Although Sadie had nothing to say at the moment she promised herself that she would warn Thompson in the morning.

Rowley fumbled at the lapels of his coat.

"F'got all 'bout it," he muttered, "f'got all 'bout it. Ain' it pritty?"

Sadie

In the palm of the hand he held out to her lay a pink and waxen cactus blossom.

"Take it," he mewed. "Brought it to you. You can—have it. Pritty, ain' it? Ain' 's pritty's you are—but pritty—pritty."

His voice had trailed off to nothing. His chin dropped again upon his breast, and this time he made no effort to arouse himself. His hands, slipping from his knees, hung limp at his sides. Sadie held her breath. In the yellow light that shone upon him where he slept she noted the regular rise and fall of his linen waistcoat. A snore, like distant thunder, rumbled up from the depths of his throat.

With her hand pressed to her mouth Sadie passed noiselessly in front of him and entered the eating house. On tip-toe she crossed the floor and ascended the steep and narrow stairs. At last, safe in her room, she flung herself upon the bed, and burying her face in the pillow gave way to the laughter that was consuming her.

Billy and the cook found Rowley still asleep where she had left him, with the lamplight gilding his head, when they returned an hour later. With difficulty they aroused him and indicated his course across Main Street. to his lonely 'dobe home. The situation was quite obvious to Billy and he called, as he passed Sadie's door:

"You awake?"

Upon her laughing reply he inquired:

"Did you have a good time with Jerry?"

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But there came no response to this from the other side of the door.

Nor did he refer to the matter in the morning, though by the grins on the faces of Skinny McGregor and Sansome and Robinson as she served their breakfast, she well knew that he had told them.

CHAPTER VII

SKINNY MCGREGOR

YOU see," observed Skinny McGregor, "it all comes of Rowley being a slant."

Sadie's eyebrows lifted. The appellation was new to her, though her own vocabularily, in that respect, cannot properly be said to have been limited.

"If he wasn't," Skinny went on, "he wouldn't have done it. But that's Rowley; that's just him. He wanted to get acquainted and had to bolster up his nerve. Every time a new woman hits town he squeezes into those Fourth of July clothes of his, and kalsomines his insides with *aqua fortis* and starts out to burn up the country. Sober, he'd shy like a colt at a street car, and stand on his own feet and giggle like a high-school blue-ribbon winner on Commencement Day. Wouldn't it make you cry?"

"It made me laugh," contradicted Sadie. "I thought I'd explode; and I nearly bit a hole in my lip to keep from it. I was almost skairt to death, though, when he first bobbed up," she added soberly.

"You needn't have been," Skinny assured her. "When Rowley's teed, he's as tame as a kitten—eat from the hand; 'specially if it happens to be a lady's hand." And his eyes lingered tenderly upon Sadie's where they lay, passively clasped, in her lap.

Skinny McGregor

Skinny had loitered for an after-breakfast cigarette in front of the eating house. Sadie sat in the doorway. They heard Billy whistling as he moved about in his room above. From the kitchen came the clank of pans being set aright by the cook. On the cinders, a yard in front of Skinny, as he sat with his chair tilted back against the wall, lay the sharply drawn shadow line of the eating-house roof. Beyond, the brazen sun poured relentlessly its heat from out an unflecked sky that was as blue as a robin's egg. The glass-framed thermometer over Skinny's head registered one hundred and five degrees, and in the distance the air trembled above the sand sweep as over the surface of a red-hot stove.

Toward the frail, pathetic little figure in the chair, Sadie had, since first she saw him squatting in the doorway of the Always Open Drug Store, felt herself strangely drawn. He seemed so direly in need of mothering, of cuddling, that she was more than half impelled, even now, to put her arms around him and croon him to sleep with his head on her bosom. A light of infinite tenderness came into her eyes as she watched him. He was so puny; and it seemed to her an almost muscular effort with which he held the half-burned cigarette between his long, thin fingers.

Thompson had told her how ill he really was, and had added that in all probability he had not long to live. Conscious as she was that he must be aware of this, it was perhaps his fortitude in the face of impending destruction that enlivened her sympathy for him and quickened the mother instinct in her heart. He ate little

Sadie

enough, she had observed, and she did not wonder that he should be so thin, and so pale, save for the spots of burning color in his sunken cheeks.

He flicked the ash from his cigarette and chuckled.

"Rowley and I had a *séance* once," he said. "Few months ago; over in the 'Monte.' He had an idea I'd tried to steal his girl."

"Has he got a girl really?" Sadie asked.

"Not as anybody knows of. He had an idea he had; that's all."

"Who was she?" Sadie's interest was growing.

"Oh, just one of the girls here in town. Name's Alice, but everybody calls her Allie. She came up from San Luis. She's got a streak of Mex. in her and ought to be able to take care of herself, but somehow she don't seem to. Sheepman by the name of Lawton—Reddy Lawton they call him 'round here on account of his hair—he's been trailin' after her. He's no good; sometimes he's worse. I used to see Allie down't San Luis, where I was 'fore I came up to Bagdad, and I've sorter kept an eye on her. One night she was standing in front of the Bun March talking to Rowley just as Reddy happened to come out of the Golden Fleece. There wasn't anything doing at the 'Monte' and I happened to be outside getting a little air. When he saw Allie with Jerry, he reared up on his hind legs and went plumb loco. In the row that followed I managed to get Allie away 'fore anything happened to her. A little while after, Rowley came tearing into the 'Monte' and wanted to know where'd I'd taken her. I didn't think

Skinny McGregor

he'd seen me. I gave him a line of hot air and he got mad and threatened to ventilate me the next time he run across me on the outside. I asked him, what was the use of waiting? The bunch laughed and he went out. Since then," Skinny concluded, throwing away the end of his cigarette, "Jerry and I ain't exactly on what you might call congenial terms."

Sadie's eyes were flashing and her hands were clasped tightly in her lap.

"But weren't you afraid?" she asked breathlessly.

Skinny looked at her, a pale smile curving his thin lips. "Who? Him! What would I be afraid of him for?" he sneered. "Besides," he added dryly, "I happened to have a good grip on the gun in my coat pocket, and, of course, if he'd made a move I'd have had him right. All the same," he declared, rising, "Jerry's got a lot of good qualities, and I'm sorry he feels the way he does. Well, I guess it's me for the 'Monte's' giddy whirl." He yawned, infinitely bored.

"Some day," Sadie said, "won't you show me the wheel, and how it works?"

The little fellow looked down into her upturned face and smiled. "Sure," he agreed, "come over any morning. There's never anybody 'round in the morning. Why can't you come over now?"

Sadie hesitated a moment doubtfully. Then: "I'll just do it!" she declared, springing to her feet. "Wait till I get my hat."

At the further end of the silent "Monte" bar, as they entered, sat Fernandez, reading a 'Frisco paper of three

Sadie

days before, and dozily puffing a black and odorous Mexican cigarette.

"José," Skinny called, "this is Miss Morrison; she's over at the Carter house, and wants to see the wheel."

Fernandez nodded and exhibited his gleaming teeth.

As he explained the workings of his toy, Skinny's little eyes glinted and the carmine brightened in his cheeks. In detail he made quite clear to Sadie the technique of play in all its multitudinous ramifications, "up and down," "corners," "across board," and "colors." Finally, by way of practical demonstration, he placed a counter on the board and shot the little ball around the rim of the whirling wheel. Sadie followed it with sparkling eyes until it clattered into a cup at the center.

"See," Skinny indicated, smiling, "I win."

Again and again, to her increasing delight as expressed in her dancing eyes, he repeated the extraordinary performance. Recalling what Thompson had told her she realized that the little gambler was operating the wheel in the light of his expert knowledge of the ailment from which it suffered, but, though she watched his hands closely, following every movement, she could not detect the trick, if trick there were.

"Now let me try it, won't you?" she proposed finally.

"Sure, come around on this side." He made room for her between the wall and the board. At first she could not shoot the little ball from under her fingers as he had. Skinny laughed.

"Here, let me show you," he said.

Skinny McGregor

One of his thin, cold hands closed upon hers, warm and plump, and at the contact a thrill passed through him, and the violet-veined lids flickered over his eyes.

"This way," he murmured huskily.

He pressed her fingers; the little ball shot out. The marker still lay where he had first placed it on the green board. Watching her hand where it rested lightly upon the outer and stationary rim of the spinning wheel he pressed with one finger gently against the casing at a certain point. She observed the movement as the ball rattled into the cup.

"Do I win or lose?" she cried, bending eagerly over the wheel.

"Win," replied Skinny tersely. "Funny, ain't it?"

Then their eyes met and in hers the little *croupier* read her knowledge of his secret.

"I'm ever so much obliged," she said, after a moment. "I wish, though, I could see it work sometime when they're really playing it."

"Why don't you come over? Billy'd bring you," Skinny suggested.

Sadie clapped her hands. "Oh, do you suppose he would?" she cried.

"Let you roll it if you want to," Skinny promised. "The boys'd be tickled to death. A tourist girl from Chicago dealt faro in here one night last summer; didn't she José?" he called across his shoulder.

Sadie turned to meet Fernandez's grin.

"Shore," he corroborated. "Come ainy time."

She laughed. "Maybe I'll fool you one of these

Sadie

nights—and come,” she warned; “you can’t tell.” Fernandez only grinned the broader. The truth was, nothing would please him better than to have the word go forth that a girl would, on a certain night, act as *croupier* at his wheel.

Skinny followed her to the door. Just outside, as they faced each other an instant—“You saw?” he asked under his breath.

Sadie nodded.

“Of course,” he added, in a half whisper, “I don’t need to ask you not to say anything about it?” She shook her head; but it was more the look in her eyes as she did so that assured him the secret of the “Monte’s” wheel was safe with her. As she walked away he turned back into the bar to meet the inquiring stare of the proprietor.

“You stuck on her, huh?” Fernandez called over the top of his paper.

The color in Skinny’s cheeks spread. “Who? Me? I’d be a wise guy to get stuck on her, now, wouldn’t I?” he replied disgustedly. But thereafter, for a long time, he sat in the window gazing off across Main Street and the tracks beyond, into the desert’s dusty face.

He wondered if his eyes had revealed his secret—the secret that he had cherished for a day. Perhaps Billy Thompson had seen him follow her hands as she placed the dishes before him at the table, for he had not once looked into Sadie’s face until this morning. Uncertain of himself he had not dared. Left to itself his devotion to her would become the devotion of a dog

Skinny McGregor

toward one who treated it with kindness ; though Skinny perhaps, was unaware of this. It was doubtless more a characteristic of the disease devouring him than of himself. Conscious of the pitiful frailty of his body he would ask only the blessed privilege of loving. A bit of human wreckage drifting aimlessly upon a sea of sand he knew that the pressure of a soft hand upon his own, the wonder light in a woman's eyes, were not for him.

As the weeks slipped by thoughts of Sadie came more and more to occupy his mind in his leisure hours, for, while he stood behind the wheel in the low-ceiled "Monte," there was no time for thought of anything beyond the little ball's mysterious and unforeseen cavortings. At such times Skinny, the spots on his cheeks a brilliant red, worked silently and swiftly. Therein lay his success as *croupier*. His eyes were on the board, and on the spinning saucer of the wheel, at the same time and he was credited with never having missed a play, or permitted the surreptitious withdrawal of a chip, once the ball had shot from under his long, slim fingers, in all the months that he had served Fernandez.

But away from the "Monte" and its magic wheel, at the eating house thrice daily or in his little tent, pitched on the sand adjoining José's 'dobe, he was another creature, quite.

He had lived in his tent since coming into the desert from Colorado three years before. A doctor at Manitou had advised him to dwell in the open if he would live, and in time he had learned to rejoice in his canvas home, affording him, as it did, the freedom of a householder,

Sadie

in his irregular comings and goings, without a householder's disquieting responsibilities.

For hours at a time, of a morning, after breakfast at the eating house and a cigarette in the sun on the cinder siding, he would sit between the pinned-back flaps at the front of the tent, reading or staring off into the South. Since Sadie's coming he had thus indulged himself even more frequently than before, and at almost any time between half past eight and noon the little flag, indicating his presence "at home," might have been seen hanging limp from its pole in the motionless air above the peak of the tent.

Billy Thompson, standing at the end of the siding one morning two months after Sadie's appearance in the desert, chanced to turn his eyes in the direction of Skinny's house. Although the tent was open the flag above was not displayed and Billy crossed over to learn the reason. He found McGregor half reclining in a steamer chair within the tent.

"What's the matter, Skinny; the flag ain't up; you sick?" he inquired.

The expression on the little fellow's face did not change.

He shook his head, wearily. "I'm all right. Forgot about the flag. Run her up, will you?"

But Billy knew that he was "on his nerve" again, as later he expressed it to Sadie. Even to him, who saw Skinny every day, often many times a day, the passing summer had left the marks of melancholy change upon his face. It was much thinner, and the spots of pink

Skinny McGregor

were broader now and brighter, and he coughed more frequently.

"Never feel quite the same with winter coming on," he said. "I haven't since the bugs built their nest—here." He tapped his sunken breast. Billy smiled. It was always thus that Skinny had referred to his illness.

"I've just been laying here, half asleep, thinking all about it," he went on, in a low tone, quite as if to himself. "And do you know what I'd like to do, Billy? What I'd like to do more'n anything else?"

Thompson leaned forward and laid a hand on the other's thin knee.

"What, Skinny?" he asked quietly.

"I'd like to get a suit of clothes, a red-hot one—like some of yours—and start out and do something—something great—just so's a lot of folks in this dinky town'd see I wasn't only a one-lung toad layin' 'round in the sun all the time, after all. That's what I'd like to do." His smile as he spoke was pathetic in its utter weariness.

Billy laughed. "Maybe you'll have a chance yet, Skinny," he prophesied.

The little fellow held out his thin hands and studied them, turning them over and over, as if they were odd pieces of mechanism that he was examining for the first time.

"Ain't much good, are they?" he mused. "Ain't worth a tinker's dam, as the old man used to say—about me."

Never before in all the time that Billy had known

Sadie

him had Skinny referred to his people, and he wondered, now, what might be the reason, apart from his illness, that lay behind his coming into the desert. But, after the way of the land wherein they dwelt, he asked no questions.

One morning, a fortnight later, he visited Skinny again where he sat loafing in the "A" of the tent and while he was there Sadie galloped up. She had ridden fast; her face was flushed, and against her cheek tossed a vagrant curl that the breeze had loosened. Dropping the reins over the head of the calico pony she dismounted and joined them. Skinny brought her a camp stool and she sat down, fanning herself vigorously with her wide-brimmed, soft, felt hat.

"How do you like my new skirt?" she asked, spreading it out. "It ain't so bad, is it?"

The garment was of the "divided" variety, for Sadie rode astride.

Billy declared his admiration, but Skinny only smiled.

"He's down in the mouth," Thompson informed her. "You'd better cheer him up."

McGregor shot him a pleading look.

"He's stringing you," he contradicted, "never better in my life. Say," he exclaimed, "that was pretty decent of Jerry Rowley to let you take his pony whenever you want to. I told you, though, he had a lot of good qualities, even if he and I have been at outs for nearly a year."

"I almost died when he told me," Sadie declared. "I'd wanted to ride; I'd wanted to a lot, but I couldn't

Skinny McGregor

see how I was going to. I couldn't afford to buy a horse. Then when he told me I could take Pedro whenever I wanted to, I nearly fell over."

Billy Thompson was looking away into the South.

"And he got you a new saddle, too. He never had that before," Skinny observed.

A wave of color came into Sadie's cheeks and she let fall her eyes. Skinny glanced from her to Billy, and in Billy's scowl perhaps he read his secret, for a long whistle escaped him and he nodded wisely.

Billy rose then, muttering something about having to make a report, and left them.

In the momentary silence that ensued Skinny studied Sadie's profile, as it was turned to him.

"Did you think?" he asked quietly, "that Jerry Rowley had sense enough to offer you that pony on his own hook? 'Course he would if he'd thought of it," he added hastily, meeting Sadie's wondering stare with a little wistful smile, "only Jerry ain't the kind that thinks."

"What do you mean?" she asked blankly.

"Billy put him up to it; of course. He lets Jerry have the credit. That's all."

"Skinny!" Sadie's throat trembled tragically.

"It's all right," the little fellow went on. "Don't you see it is? Only I wouldn't mention it to Billy if I was you. Just go on letting him think you don't know. He'd be sore if he thought you did."

"But, Skinny, how do *you* know," she insisted, still in doubt.

Sadie

"Can't I see?" he replied. "Couldn't anybody see?" He smiled as he spoke, but in his smile there seemed to be reflected some shadow of the pain he suffered.

Slowly the meaning of the speech dawned upon the girl before him. In her eyes, as for an instant she let them rest upon the pony standing just outside the tent, dejected of head and somnolent, a thin mist gathered.

"Skinny"—her voice trembled—"I'm sorry you told me."

He sighed. "Oh, I suppose I've shoved my foot in it again," he exclaimed. "I always do."

"No, you haven't," she took him up quickly. "I didn't mean that, Skinny."

"Fact of the matter is, Sadie," he went on, "there ain't anybody in town—even old Fernandez—who wouldn't give you anything they've got—if you happened to want it. He ain't like to forget what you did for his wife."

This reference to Sadie's tender nursing of the Señora Fernandez on the arrival of the fifth small Fernandez in this vale of sand caused her eyes to brighten momentarily.

"Why, anybody'd done that, Skinny," she declared impulsively.

"Uh, huh." Skinny winked. "Maybe—only nobody ever had before. Why, you've reformed the town," he ran on. "Robinson's had his hair cut, Sansome's been wearing a white shirt for nearly six months, and Jerry

Skinny McGregor

Rowley's quit drinking—I mean *hard*. He couldn't quit altogether. He's worn that linen vest of his more since you hit town than he ever did before. And as for the kids! Lord, they have to tell their own mothers who they are, since you've got 'em to washing their faces! I suppose the next thing they'll be playing parchesi and ping-pong down at the 'Monte' and I'll lose my little old job."

"Oh, Skinny, shut up!" Sadie cried and made playfully to strike him with her quirt, but he dodged.

"That's right," he insisted.

"And I told him I couldn't go to the dance with him," she declared.

Skinny sat up. "Who?" he asked blankly.

"Mr. Rowley."

He lay back again.

"I'm going with Mr. Thompson," Sadie added.

"Wish I was able to attend," Skinny said. "The dances down at San Luis are warm ones. You won't need a fur coat. Going to ride over?"

Sadie nodded. "But I wish now," she declared, "that I hadn't told Mr. Thompson I'd go."

Skinny leaned suddenly forward, and as she spoke he observed, pointing:

"There goes Reddy Lawton and Allie, over there. They must have made up."

Sadie went to the front of the tent. Lawton and the girl were crossing Main Street. If they had "made up" as Skinny suggested they gave no sign, for suddenly the girl snatched her arm from Lawton's clutch and ran

Sadie

swiftly across the street. For a moment the man stood very still, where she had left him, then, shrugging his shoulders, turned and walked rapidly away, in the opposite direction.

"He'll kill her yet," Skinny declared casually.

The eyes which Sadie turned to his were glittering and about her mouth appeared the hard lines of sudden determination.

"There's a good chance for missionary work," the little fellow sneered. "Only a gun would be better than a prayer book."

"Why don't she leave him alone?" Sadie asked harshly. "Why don't she hand him a good one and quit him?"

Skinny studied her face as she stood looking down at him, awaiting his answer.

"Reddy don't happen to be that kind," he drawled. "He won't let her."

She struck her skirt smartly with the quirt she carried, the thong of which encircled her wrist.

"She's a fool," she declared. "Some day, maybe, I'll tell her so."

So saying she left him and caught up the reins, hanging from the pony's bit. With something more than admiration glowing in his eyes Skinny saw her spring lightly into the saddle and heard her cluck to Pedro. Then, as horse and rider disappeared up Main Street, his fingers uncurled and he closed his eyes with a sigh of infinite weariness.

Ten minutes later Billy Thompson in his room at

Skinny McGregor

the eating house heard Sadie's footfalls on the stairs. As she passed his half open door he called to her and she stopped. He was sitting by the open window cleaning the heavy, blue-steel revolver she had so often noticed hanging in its holster of stamped leather from a nail in the wall at the head of his bed.

"Charley's been kicking," he began slowly, without lifting his eyes, "about your eating out there in the kitchen. It ain't very big, you know, and—well, I guess it would make it easier for him if you took your meals in the dining room from now on."

In the pause that followed Sadie looked down; she drew her lower lip between her teeth, and the color deepened in her cheeks.

"Very well, Mr. Thompson," she replied finally.

"Oh, yes; that reminds me." Billy held the cylinder of the gun to his eye and squinted through the chambers. "I meant to speak about it before. You see, out in this country, they don't 'Mister' folks much. You're the only party in town that calls me 'Mister' and—well, it makes me feel so blamed old I wish you'd cut it out. Call me 'Billy'—Sadie—if you will; I'd be much obliged."

It is perhaps just as well that he did not look at her as he spoke, for had he, it is doubtful if he would have been able to resist the impulse to take her in his arms then and there. Instead he fell to polishing the pearl grip of the gun with a piece of chamois.

"All right, Mister—Billy."

They both laughed, then turning, that he might not

Sadie

see her burning face, Sadie ran down the corridor to her own room. The gun was permitted to rest forgotten for the moment on Billy's knee while he stared through the doorway where she had stood, and perhaps only Skinny McGregor, of all the people in Bagdad, could have read aright the declaration in his eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DANCE AT SAN LUIS

IN the light of what little McGregor had revealed to her concerning the trend of Billy Thompson's sentiment, Sadie, during the days that followed, again and again asked herself if, after all, she should accompany him to San Luis as she had promised to do. Not that she was any less eager to attend the dance than she had been. She had heard so much of previous affairs of the sort, that, on the contrary, her girlish curiosity was thoroughly aroused. If Skinny had only asked her, or Robinson, or even Sansome, who on three different occasions of late had brought her gaudy boxes of dried candy filched from his none too abundant stock, she would not have hesitated. The doubt, which first had arisen in her mind, of the truth of Skinny's declaration, had since, she assured herself, been obliterated by Billy's own actions. Had he not requested her to call him by that affectionate diminutive which Bagdad, in its easy familiarity in all such matters, had bestowed upon him; and had he not requested her to share the table in the dining room with himself and the "regulars" hereafter? Moreover, there was her declination of Rowley's invitation to serve as an excuse for not accompanying Billy, she assured herself. However, her mind was made up for her in the

Sadie

end by Billy himself, who at breakfast on the following day announced that Rowley had declared his intentions of joining a prospecting expedition that would leave for the northern gold fields on the very night of the dance. Thus robbed of the one excuse she would have had for not accepting Billy's "bid," Sadie straightway flung discretion and further consideration of the matter to the winds and decided she would go. Yes, she would go with Billy, happen what might.

The dance had for several days constituted the chief topic of conversation among the *habitués* of the eating house, and properly so, for Gonzales's "parties" were famous in that particular corner of the Never-never land. Accordingly, on the morning of the momentous day, Sadie was bubbling with expectancy. All the afternoon Billy, in his room cleaning his puttees and touching up with gasolene the straps and flaps on his khaki riding clothes, heard her through the thin partition bustling about in her chamber, and singing low to herself as she prepared for the adventure into the unknown that lay before her.

The yellow sun had dropped below the western line and all the sky, save in the east where the violet shadows deepened, was a riot of gold and red and amethyst, as Billy rode down the siding leading Sadie's horse. Robinson and the cook came out to see them off, and while they contested each his right to assist her in mounting the little animal, Rowley shouted across Main Street a command that they take care of themselves and have "a good time."

The Dance at San Luis

"Think you can run things all right, Charley?" Billy inquired as he rolled a cigarette.

"Sure," declared the cook, with satisfying confidence.

Sadie caught up her rein, and waving a salutation that included not only Robinson and the white-capped Charley, but the distant Rowley as well, they rode away.

"I suppose those two'll be getting married one of these days," the operator observed disconsolately. "I never thought it of Billy, though. He's got it bad; can't keep his eyes off'n her."

"Neither can you," snapped Charley testily. "That's the trouble; the whole dum town's stuck on her; stuck on her proper—except me." With which declaration he turned and with a sigh disappeared through the gaping doorway of the eating house.

Besides these two there was still another who had, with quite similar emotions, watched Billy and Sadie as they rode away—Skinny McGregor—and oddly enough, perhaps, the thought that framed itself in his mind as their ponies broke into an easy canter, was just such a one as that to which Robinson had given expression. Only Skinny did not voice the thought as Robinson had done. No one but Fernandez, polishing glasses behind his bar, would have heard him if he had, and Fernandez would not have understood.

In the distance the two ponies were little more than moving spots as Skinny, with one last wistful look, turned back into the bar and seated himself, with a deep breath, behind the wheel. Tilting his chair against the wall he closed his eyes. Presently he began to whistle, softly;

Sadie

then the whistling ceased. A drowsiness crept over him, a delicious sensation of lassitude. Once Fernandez threw a cracker at him, but it struck the wall between his head and the dollar slot machine and fell, shattered, to the floor, without awakening him. Even the scuff of Reddy Lawton's heavily shod feet as he came into the bar to have his flask filled was insufficient to arouse him, as likewise was the brief conversation that ensued between the sheepman and the proprietor across the stained and mottled board.

"Goin' down t' San Luis?" Fernandez inquired, wiping the bottle on his apron.

"Ever hear of me missin' one?" Lawton replied. Then leaning over the bar he winked heavily and observed in low-voiced confidence: "Say, José, you ought to see the rig the lady's in!"

Little Skinny in his tilted chair, behind the silent wheel, dozed peacefully.

Off to the South, in the middle of the wide, hard-beaten path, between the ruts cut across the desert's breast by the broad-tired wheels of the great borax wagons, Billy and Sadie, side by side, and so close that now and again their stirrups touched, rode on.

"It'll be a little different from the dances you're used to back in Kansas City," Billy said in reply to Sadie's question.

"How?" she asked.

His smile was annoyingly suggestive.

"Apt to be like 'most anything," he observed, "that's why I brought a gun."

The Dance at San Luis

Her hand clutched the rein spasmodically and her eyes sparkled.

"It isn't dangerous, is it?" she asked, and in her voice there was a pleading note indicative, perhaps, of a hope, on her part, that it might be.

"No, not 'specially," he assured her. "Fact is, this country quit being dangerous when the story writers back in New England discovered it. You see," he went on with cheerful sarcasm, "there used to be a lot of bad men down here; more here maybe than anywhere else, unless it's up around Santa Fé. But when the story-book folks began writing about 'em, and making 'em ten times worse than the worst of 'em ever dreamed of being, they went and laid down and died. They couldn't live up to the story writer's accounts of 'em and it was shame they died of—really—those that didn't let some one-armed deputy United States marshal with pink whiskers and fringe on his gloves, capture 'em alive. The only ones left are the false alarms, the tin-horn four flushers; the kind that kill women and never take a chance with a man until they find out for sure he ain't got one of these little ready references on him." He patted the pearl grip of the gun that hung in its stamped leather holster against his thigh. "Reddy Lawton's one of 'em," he added, "but I'm just carrying this for show. Don't you think it's pretty?"

"Is that why you cleaned it?" Sadie inquired naïvely.

Billy glanced into her laughing eyes. "I'd forgotten you saw me," he answered, and looked away.

The last glint of gold had faded from the western sky and the shadows were gathering thick about them as night descended. In the half light, the witching mystery of the desert deepened. The stark and rigid cacti amid which they rode took on a certain fantastic semblance to giant sentinels, posted here and there to guard the trail. The evening breeze was rising; they felt its cool, dry caress upon their faces.

"You see," Billy ran on, "we're pretty close to the border down here, and sometimes that makes it a little lively. Now and then one of the 'fancy boys'—one of the real Castilian gazabos—bobs up full of *mescale* and turns a trick or two. Usually it's over some *señorita* or other; some dusky-eyed maiden who spends six hours a day on her teeth and lets her finger nails slide. Or maybe one of the rangers ventilates a chap that's trying to glut the labor market by running a bunch of Pig Tails over from Sonora. But mostly they're girl fights among the Mexicans. You'll see plenty of the sort I mean to-night."

"But there'll be white folks there, too, won't there?" Sadie asked.

"Sure," he declared. "Punchers, sheepmen, maybe some tourists, folks like Skinny that are a few chips shy on lungs—but wait till you're there. I don't want to spoil it for you. Only don't get your mind made up to see a palace, even if that is the name of Gonzales's place. There you are now"—he was standing in his stirrups—"that's San Luis off there!"

In the glare of noon Sadie would have beheld a num-

The Dance at San Luis

ber of 'dobe structures for the greater part huddled together on the desert's breast as if for warmth; narrow labyrinthine streets, little more than paths winding in and out among the buildings; a plaza with a well, shaded by a great cottonwood tree; an ancient Mexican cart leaning on its warped and shrunken wheels of solid wood; goats wandering at will; the ruins of the old Mission, the hollow eyes of its crumbling belfry staring fixedly off across the sand; the new church lifting its gilded cross to the cloudless sky—and children; children clad for the greater part in rags; children whose eyes glinted like beads in the blinding glare. But as they rode down upon it now she beheld only the shivering ghost of the town; darting beams of yellow light; but she heard, clearly across the distance, the noises of its life, clamorous after the silence through which they had come. Five minutes later they rode at a gallop into the settlement.

His pony's length in advance Billy led the way. Through the open doorway of a saloon, as they passed, shrilled the strident voice of a woman, singing to the subdued accompaniment of a guitar and the rhythmic clack of castanets.

"Getting ready," Billy called across his shoulder; but Sadie, absorbed in the novelty of her surroundings, did not answer.

Once she caught a glimpse of a man standing close to the wall below a window the shutter of which swung back above the narrow pavement. The light from within, shining across the shoulder of the girl at the window, her fat arms folded upon the sill, struck full upon her

Sadie

lover's upturned face. Sadie noted the peaked sombrero ornamented with stars of bullion that glinted in the yellow light. Then the picture vanished. Veering a corner Billy flushed a covey of children and Sadie laughed aloud to see them dart hither and thither and plunge into the dark vestibules of the houses like prairie dogs into their tunnels.

Silently moving figures wrapped in *serapes*, the wide brims of their tall hats low across their eyes, passed close to the 'dobe walls, appeared from out the darkness an instant in the paths of light streaming from the little square windows, then glided back into the black again. It was all very new to Sadie and she was deliciously conscious of the thrill that crept over her and tingled at her finger tips as they threaded the narrow streets. It was as if she were being borne through a city of dreams peopled with silent, gliding, half-hidden shades.

Suddenly, at a turn Gonzales's Palace, streaming yellow light from every window, rose before her and she gasped, so sudden was the transition from darkness into brilliance. Billy pulled up his pony and she came alongside him.

"Pretty gorgeous, ain't it?" he observed.

"Let me take it all in," she answered under her breath.

The structure was of two stories, facing the plaza. Down the front, its floor slightly raised above the level of the street, was a roofed porch, now half filled with men and women, who for the greater part stood leaning against the wall in silence. In front of the porch ran a paling

The Dance at San Luis

to which were tied a number of saddled ponies; and at the lower end of the building was a square corral which, early as the hour was, held many more. Through the wide main entrance of the bar, as they approached, floated out to them the nervous rattle of the roulette wheel, the sharp click of chips at the faro table, and the musical clink of glasses. Yet even above these sounds of revelry were heard the vibrant tones of a guitar, strummed in lively time; the higher, thinner call of a mandolin, and the wail of a piano. As Sadie dismounted the air was changed to one more familiar to *habitués* apparently, for immediately it was taken up within and lustily sung by half a hundred men and women.

Billy secured their ponies at the lower end of the paling and taking Sadie's arm guided her within by way of a side door at the back of the bar. The room was crowded. There were sheepmen in corduroy from over East; cowboys in mangy goatskin "chaps," ragged and rent by the cactus through which they had ridden; *vaqueros* and ranch employees from the border, their lithe bodies set off by the gaudy, striped *serapes* hanging from their shoulders, their bronzed faces flushed with drink and excitement beneath the brims of their sombreros, ornamented with tinsel balls and stars and bound around the brim with gold and silver cord as thick as rope. Everyone was talking, gesticulating, calling.

Billy glanced at Sadie. Her wide eyes were feasting on the scene; her face was flushed as if she were waiting for the signal to become a participant in the revelry rather than as she was, a mere spectator to it.

Sadie

A hatless Mexican in his shirt sleeves accosted Billy and waved his hand.

"Good time," he shouted above the din.

Billy nodded. "That's Gonzales; the owner of the joint," he muttered below his breath. "His old man used to run the Palace before him, when it was wilder down here. There used to be bullet holes all over these walls, but Miguel's plugged 'em up and hung whisky placards over 'em. Come on; let's get a place."

The dance hall into which he led her ran the full length of the building at the rear of the bar. Around three sides was a gallery partitioned into stalls, with curtains that might be drawn close across the front above the rail, and little narrow doors at the back.

"This has seen some pretty gaudy nights," Billy observed. "If it'll chirp you up to know it, probably a hundred men have died in this room before they could draw on the fellows that got 'em. But nowadays there's nothing doing unless a Mexican sticks a knife into somebody that he thinks is trying to steal his girl."

Sadie pulled in her breath greedily between tight-shut teeth.

At the end of the gallery were the six musicians, spectacles all, in the velvet and gold, now somewhat tarnished, of another day. They were young fellows with a certain air of bravado in their manner and frank insolence in their eyes. The seams of their slashed, wide-bottomed breeches of magenta velvet were lined by rows of silver discs, and, garnishing their boleros, was still more silver. Their waists were swathed with vari-

The Dance at San Luis

colored sashes selected to match the *scrapes* carelessly hanging from their shoulders, and the flowing scarves about their smooth brown throats were startling in their brilliancy.

Billy led the way up the stairs, behind the orchestra and down the narrow run at the rear of the stalls to a box directly opposite the wide entrance to the bar. That they were not alone up here was indicated by the drawn curtains in front of other boxes here and there around the gallery.

"The boy will be in for drinks before long," Billy observed as Sadie seated herself at the rail and removed her hat. "A little of Gonzales's wine won't hurt you, but you needn't drink it if you don't want to."

Already a dozen couples were wandering aimlessly about the rough and splintered floor below. With a smile playing around her lips and eyes, Sadie observed them separately as one by one they came from beneath the gallery within her range of vision. From the rest of them her attention was diverted presently by the appearance of a girl at the lower end of the hall. She wore the Mexican costume, but Sadie saw only her back as she stood below, her face uplifted, talking to the musicians, all of whom, she noted, hung over the rail with obvious delight.

"Do you know who that is?" Billy asked.

Sadie's eyes met his. "No, who?"

"Wait till she turns around."

She turned then and Sadie saw that it was Allie, Reddy Lawton's girl as she had come to be designated

Sadie

in Bagdad for reasons as distressing as they were apparent.

Sadie saw her glance quickly over her shoulder, and following the direction of her eyes beheld Lawton himself standing in the entrance to the bar and glowering at her. Allie gave a little shrug—whereat the Mexicans showed their teeth—and, waving her hand to them, joined him. Then they disappeared from Sadie's sight into the crowded bar beyond.

"Reddy looked ugly, didn't he?" commented Billy, from where he sat behind her in the shadow, his chair tilted back against the wall at the side of the narrow door. "She wants to be a little careful how she carries on when Red's around. He's one of the kind of bad men I told you about. He'd just as soon kill a woman as a lizard, maybe a little sooner."

Sadie shivered. "Poor girl," she murmured.

"Poor nothing!" Billy snapped. "She knows it. That's why she likes him."

Slowly her head turned until their eyes met. A moment Sadie hesitated, then she asked, coldly: "Do you believe that?"

Billy laughed by way of reply and she looked away again, permitting him to study the curve of her neck and shoulder through the meshes of the lace yoke in the waist she wore.

"Why don't it begin?" she complained, after a long period of silence, and even as she spoke Gonzales, appearing in the entrance, waved a hand to the watching musicians. At the first cry of the piano the bar emptied

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itself into the hall, and from an almost barren room it became, in an instant, a riot of trembling color and alive with tumultuous revelry.

Sadie straightened in her chair and Billy heard, smiling, the hiss of her in-drawn breath.

"It promises to be a warm one," he observed, but she made no reply, so eager was she that nothing that might occur on the floor below should escape her sparkling eyes. The figures, gliding through the yellow light, the shifting, changing colors, the scuff of the shuffling feet, the laughter, the shouts, and above all the frantic shrieks of the piano, combined to set on edge every responsive nerve in the girl's slim body. She tapped the time with one foot upon the floor of the stall and swayed her head. Selecting a couple, perhaps a cowboy in goat-skin "chaps," who held close to his breast in a wild embrace a dusky-eyed *señorita* of the border, whose eyes, uplifted to his own, spoke her ecstasy at the moment, Sadie would attempt to follow them through the mazes of the dance as they threaded in and out among the others like a shuttle gone wild in a richly colorous warp.

The first excitement subsiding at last, she settled back in her chair to a calm enjoyment of the scene.

A group of tourists, the women of the party apparently in doubt, entered the room and secured stalls near the orchestra, and presently Sadie saw one of the young men of the company whirling through a dance, obviously to his companion's great delight, with a Mexican girl whose naked throat rose like an olive pillar from her bosom.

With each succeeding dance the revelry became more wanton and here and there were enacted little scenes of primitive sport that caused Sadie, glimpsing them, to let fall her eyes. The primordial instincts of the first man at a bean feast were loosened here, and the wanton trampling under foot of civilization's conventions became a veritable massacre. Evidently the spirit of the dance had become too compelling for the tourists. In single file, Sadie saw them descend the stairs and vanish through the door. Ten minutes later a fresh impetus was given the affair by the sudden appearance upon the floor of a group of shouting cowboys, in the full regalia of their calling, who, snatching up the girls closest at hand, whirled them giddily into the heart of the revelry.

"That's a part of the Bar Y. outfit from over Cottonwood way," Billy exclaimed, with quickening interest. "That tall fellow's Slim Leverett. There's 'Wyoming' and 'Texas' and there's 'Curly'—the one leaning against the table smoking a cigarette."

The first named had long since become lost in the whirl, but the man whom Billy had called "Curly" Sadie saw. Evidently it was not his intention to follow the lead of his fellows. Rather, he watched them with the light of amusement in his eyes. Among those about him he was as one apart. With them in their gayety, though he was, even to the girl gazing down from the box across the hall unseen by him, he was not *of* them. His sombrero pushed back, revealed his youthful face fresh and clean-cut beneath its crown of yellow hair.

Billy touched Sadie on the shoulder and she started.

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"See that girl over there, at the other end of the table Curly Watrous is sitting on?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's Margarita Morales. She's supposed to be a howling beauty—the belle of the border. Her old man's Pedro Morales. The Government's tried to nail him a million times; smuggling Pig Tails across the line, you know. She belongs to that tall Mexican in the orange and green *serape*. They say three or four fellows have stuck each other on account of her. See how he keeps an eye on her? Notice that little Mex. talking to Allie over in the corner? That's Miguel Fernandez, José's brother that runs the Monte, back in Bagdad. He and José had a fight once and don't speak now. He's another one of the tin-horn bad men I was talking about. His girl tried to run a knife into him down here last year and the next summer eloped with one of the 'ostlers of Orrin's circus. Last anybody heard of her she was shooting *frijoles* and *chili con carne* in an American boarding house in the City of Mexico. There's a chunk of romance for you. Say!" he exclaimed, "how do you like it anyway. Think you've had enough? Are you tired?"

"Just a little—in my eyes," Sadie replied. "I never saw anything like it."

"Makes the dances back in Kansas City look like Sunday-school entertainments, don't it?" he inquired dryly.

"And then some," she agreed.

She leaned forward again. The table whereon Curly

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Watrous had sat was vacant. She swept the dancing floor with her eyes but he had disappeared.

"I guess I'll go down and get a little bottle of Gonzales's wine," Billy said over her shoulder. "It's a long ride back and it'll do you good."

"All right," she replied.

She heard the click of the lock in the little door behind her as he closed it. Leaning over the rail she searched the shifting throng below for some sign of the vanished cowboy.

"Watrous," she murmured under her breath, "Watrous, Watrous, Watrous."

But he was nowhere to be seen, and with a little sigh she settled back in her chair.

Earlier in the evening two or three altercations had occurred in different parts of the hall, but as the results had in no case been fraught with disaster—indeed the affairs had been of but momentary duration—Sadie was not prepared, in spite of Billy's assurance that Gonzales's dances were always "warm ones," for the outbreak which occurred suddenly, and not five minutes after he had left her, directly beneath the box in which she sat. Her attention was first aroused by a sudden ceasing of the music. The musicians were leaning over the rail at their end of the gallery, while across the hall a score of obviously frightened girls were struggling to escape through the entrance to the bar. Then the momentary silence was torn by a woman's agonized shriek!—

"For God's sake don't let him kill her!"

At the cry Sadie shrank back, and her face blanched.

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Then she saw Gonzales plunge through the throng at the bar door and rush down the floor brandishing a revolver. His face was scarlet in the yellow light, and she distinguished quite clearly the thick, ropey cords of his neck. Flourishing his gun aloft in the faces of the gaping musicians:—

“Play, you damn fools!” he cried. “Play!”

Thereupon he ran back and cast himself fearlessly into the heart of the *mêlée* beneath the gallery, brushing men and women aside with his waving arms. In the tense instant that ensued, Sadie heard a man’s harsh voice shout:

“It’s all over!”—and another: “Cut loose up there!”

The piano wailed again, and as suddenly as it had ceased, the dancing was resumed, more frantically even than before, it seemed to the girl crouching in the rear of the box.

“Why don’t Billy come!” she muttered aloud.

A faintness due as much to the vitiated air of the place as to her fright crept over her. Groping blindly her fingers encountered the latch of the little door, and opening it she slipped out into the narrow, dim-lit corridor behind the box. At the window there she flung back her head, and closing her eyes, drew in deep, full breaths of the reviving outer air. Presently, the faintness passing, she glanced down. On a pillar in the Palace yard an oil lamp burned, and beneath it, vivid in the circle of yellow light, she saw Billy and Watrous. The latter was leaning lazily against the pillar and rolling a cigarette; from the shining surface of the slim wine

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bottle in Billy's hand the lamplight glinted. They were talking in tones so low that she could not distinguish their words. Watrous struck a match and raised it to his cigarette. Looking up, as he exhaled the first mouthful of smoke, his eyes, it seemed to Sadie, found her own and instinctively she drew back from the window. In another instant she would have called to Billy, but as it was she heard, just then, the rapid patter of slipped feet behind her. Turning quickly, her eyes encountered the blanched and tearful face of the girl, Allie.

"What's the matter?" she cried impulsively.

Allie clutched her breast. "Oh, my God," she sobbed, "he's going to kill me! He's coming!"

"Who?" Sadie gasped.

"Reddy!"

Instantly Sadie acted. Seizing the half-fainting girl by the arm she thrust her forward into the box and shut the door.

"Don't make a sound!" she ordered.

At the window, there, she awaited, with seeming calmness, whatsoever the next moment might produce.

She glanced down upon the Palace yard; Billy and Watrous were no longer there. Scarcely had she lifted her eyes when Lawton, his jealousy transformed to a murderous madness by the liquor seething in his uncouth body, came staggering toward her down the corridor. With low growls of sullen anger he flung open, one after another, the doors of the various stalls and peered within. Half blinded by the drink, as he was, he did not perceive Sadie until he confronted her as she stood with her

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back against the door of the box in which the fear-smitten Allie crouched.

Unsteadily he took one step backward, and blinked.

Satisfied apparently that it was no ghost, but a mere girl confronting him, he thrust forward his face, wherein was reflected all his bestial rage, and growled:

"Where is she?"

Blankly, Sadie stared into his lowering visage.

"Who?"

Her voice was tense and vibrant.

"M' girl; I seen her!"

He came nearer, steadying himself with one hand against the wall.

"Lemme in there," he demanded.

Sadie's breath trembled in her throat and her clutch on the latch of the little door tightened.

"You ain't going in there!"

Her voice quivered with passion; her teeth came together with a little click; the lines about her mouth deepened and her eyes flashed a challenge into those of the sodden beast before her.

Lawton's jaw dropped. Dazed, he passed a huge hand across his mouth; then slowly a horrid leer crept over his countenance.

"I'll show yeh!" he snarled; and came closer, half crouching, as if about to spring.

But for the note of contempt in his voice as the words leaped from his lips, Sadie, perhaps, would have succumbed, without further attempt to defend the trembling, tawdry creature on the other side of the door; but

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as it was, the leer and the movement of his arms, as he made to take her, stung her passion to its core. In a frenzy of rage she flung herself bodily upon him with a cry that was almost feline. The instant her clawing fingers touched his face, the girl in her died out and she became a cat; a cat maddened to fury, and, like such a one, she fought with tooth and nail. She heard nothing save the rasp of Lawton's breath as he attempted to escape from her ferocious onslaught; she saw nothing save flashes of red; and as she beat him back, little by little down the narrow corridor, murder waxed big in her heart.

Dazed by the suddenness of her attack Lawton had not, at first, made any effort to meet the blows she rained upon his face, nor the vicious clawing of her wiry fingers; but now, as one of them found his eye, he hissed, mad with pain, "You devil, you!" and struggled on his own account in sheer self-defense.

Sadie's hair, loosened, fell about her face, blinding her. She made to brush it back. Instantly Lawton had beaten down her arms and she felt herself crushed within his own, as helpless as a rabbit in the tightening coils of a hungry snake. His breath struck hot upon her cheek; his coarse laugh sounded close in her ringing ears.

He had won. That was her only thought. He had won.

And then, as her senses waned, the miracle occurred.

Little by little she felt the clasp of his arms about her loosen until finally she slipped from his embrace and

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sank upon her knees. Brushing her hair from her bloodless face she beheld the man himself sinking to the floor before her, his legs bending like whalebone beneath him. Lifting higher her staring eyes she saw across his shoulder, in the dim light of the corridor, the tense face of Billy Thompson, his lips tight-stretched and parted across his teeth, as his long, slim, steely fingers—locked in front—closed tighter and tighter around the gurgling Lawton's purple throat.

"Billy!" she cried. "Billy!" And with a little whine that was half a sob she fell forward.

When at last she opened her eyes it seemed to her that she had been asleep a long time. She was sitting on the floor of the corridor with her back against the partition of the box, the breeze from the open window blowing full upon her face.

"Here, drink this," she heard a voice say as from a long way off, and lifting her eyes they met Thompson's. He was kneeling beside her holding out a glass of wine.

"Thanks," she murmured, and drank greedily.

Then, little by little, memory of what had passed emerged from the chaos of her mind.

"Where's Allie?" she asked, with reviving strength.

Blankly, Thompson stared into her face.

"Allie?" he echoed.

"Oh, yes." She sighed and passed her hand across her forehead. "He was going to kill her. That's what it was all about," she murmured.

The look of inquiry in his face gave place to an expression of dumb amazement.

"She got away," he said simply, "while you were at it, I guess."

"And—and has Reddy gone?" she pleaded.

He smiled broadly.

"I guess you'd thought so if you'd heard him land at the foot of the stairs. That's what brought you to."

He helped her to rise and stood by watching her while she caught up her disheveled hair.

"Do you feel able to ride back?" he inquired presently; "if you don't——"

"It'll do me good," she broke in. "Wait till I get my hat."

As she walked back down the corridor to the box from which the girl Allie had escaped, unseen, during the heat of the conflict, Billy Thompson, gazing after her, slowly shook his head and emphasized the wonder that he felt by making a little metallic sound with his tongue against his teeth.

"I'm all right now," Sadie declared as she rejoined him, tucking her hair into the crown of her wide-brimmed hat.

"You're sure you've had enough?" Billy urged earnestly.

The look that she gave him was worth more than her assurance as proof that she was quite herself again.

"A plenty," she replied, and smiled wearily.

And so, amid the increased clamor of the dance, they descended the stairs together to the accompaniment of the piano's frantic cry; and passed out of the Palace into the cool of the starlit night.

CHAPTER IX

SADIE INTERVENES

SIDE by side and silently, save for the thud of the ponies' hoofs, they rode forth into the desert. In the purple sky a white moon floated, and over the land lay a shimmer of silver save where the tall cacti cast their shadows of deathly black upon the sand.

San Luis was far behind when Billy broke the silence.

"Sadie," he said, riding closer, so close that he might have encircled her waist with his arm, "Sadie, do you mind telling me what you did it for?"

She looked at him. In the moonlight her face was strangely pale, but her eyes were questioning.

"What?" she asked.

"The row with Lawton," he explained. "Why didn't you let Allie paddle her own canoe?"

"And not help her?" she exclaimed, the wonder deepening in her eyes, "when he would have killed her?"

"Well, what of it?" Billy caught up the rein with a little impatient gesture.

"Billy!"

As once before it had done to-night his heart leaped in his breast now as she spoke his name, but something in the tone of her voice, perhaps a note of pained reproof, caused him to look away regretfully.

"If you've framed it up to save the lives of all the

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girls out here, like Allie," he went on quietly, "you'll find your work cut out for you, good and plenty. Why, Sadie, they grow in this country like cactus, and like the cactus they're able to take care of themselves without help."

"Allie can't," she put in quickly.

"Maybe not," he agreed, if doubtfully, "but—oh, well, she ain't your kind, Sadie."

It was not quite what he had meant to say, and he was a little fearful of what her reply might be. Leaning forward in the saddle he spoke to the pony softly and patted its sleek neck.

"She's a girl, Billy." That was all and he breathed a sigh of relief.

For a little space they rode on in silence and then Sadie suddenly exclaimed:

"Oh, if you'd only seen her!" There were tears in her voice now. "Her poor, painted face was so pathetic. She looked like a little scared rabbit." Her tone changed; leaning toward him, she said: "If *you'd* been in my place and she'd asked *you* to help her, would *you* have turned her down? *Would* you, Billy?"

"That'd been different," was his weak reply. "You're a girl."

"What of that?" she retorted sharply. "Ain't that all the more reason I ought to have helped her?"

Billy was uncomfortable; he felt that she was making him appear pitifully small in his own eyes.

"There ain't many women that would," he insisted doggedly.

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"I know that," was her quick reply, as with a toss of her head she straightened in the saddle. "I've seen 'em hold their skirts away when they passed girls like Allie. And generally those that do are worse than the girls themselves, only they don't know it, the poor fools!"

Billy glanced up; Sadie was staring straight ahead at nothing.

"I guess you're different from most women," he observed after a moment.

She turned to him then and he saw how bright her eyes were.

"I hope to God I am!" she exclaimed passionately.

"You are," he nodded, and a thin smile bent his lips.

"I've always been," she went on quietly. "Maybe it's because I've had to be. And all my life I've done just the opposite, usually, from what other girls would do. I guess I'm mostly man."

She spoke the last with a note of wistful regret in her voice, and let fall her eyes.

"No, you ain't," Thompson contradicted with vehemence. "You're just a girl, after all; only, Sadie"—he leaned toward her—"you're the right sort—and they ain't common."

"Thanks Billy." She laughed lightly.

"It's always been Johnny on the spot with me," she declared presently. "Usually I don't lose any sleep over results. I just do a thing and let 'er go at that. Oh, I know it's wrong," she made haste to add, "but somehow

I don't seem able to help it. It was like that to-night—with Lawton, I mean. If he'd landed on Allie it would have been all day with her. Poor, skairt little thing; she couldn't put up a fight. There wasn't anybody else, so I had to sail in. Only," she concluded hesitatingly, "I didn't figure it all out like that before I did it. Billy"—her eyes, calmly frank now, met his—"would you believe it if I told you that back in Kansas City, just before I pulled freight for out here, I could have killed a man—and been glad of it?"

He did not reply.

"If I'd stayed on there," she added, "I'd have done it; that's why I came."

"I guess I understand," he murmured as his eyes lost hers, "I guess I do."

She caught up the rein. "Oh, don't let's talk about such stuff any more!" she cried. "Billy, tell me who is Curly Watrous?"

The sudden change in her manner was startling, and Billy smiled quizzically.

"He's one of the Bar Y outfit," he told her. "I ran up against him at Cottonwood once. He left for the North to-night; going to take a shot at prospecting for a couple of months. I was telling him about Rowley."

"Does he come from 'round here?" Sadie asked.

"Who?"

"Curly—I mean Watrous."

"I guess so; why?"

"Nothing. I just wondered; that's all."

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She spoke to the pony and its canter quickened.

"Slim Everett had a message for me from Al Tunnison," Billy announced, after a space.

Sadie recalled having heard Tunnison referred to as the proprietor of the Palace Hotel at Cottonwood.

"What does *he* want?" she inquired.

"Girl."

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Just that; a girl. His girl's got married, like most of 'em do down here, and seems he's having a devil of a time locating another. Wants me to find him one if I can."

"They ain't any too thick, are they?" Sadie mused aloud.

"Thick!" Billy was staring at her. "Thick! Good Lord, they're scarcer'n snowstorms in Death Valley!"

She laughed.

"I'll have to see Skinny about it," he added. "He knows the location of every piece of calico in the Territory."

After that they rode a long distance without speaking. The desert, taking on the quality of the shimmering moonlight, trembled about them. The ridges of the low-lying buttes were silvered like the crests of waves, frozen as they tumbled. Above, the glittering, icy star points rioted in the soft sky; and the silence was the silence of a dead, deserted land, in which they and the horses that they rode were the only breathing things. Again, something of the weird mystery of the desert night crept

unbidden into Sadie's heart, and suddenly, so suddenly that Billy started:

"Oh, you don't know how I love it—how I love it, out here!" she cried.

"Do you?" he asked gently. "Why?"

"I don't know," she ran on impulsively, "I guess maybe because it's so free, and so big, and so clean. There's room to move and stretch in. I feel it most at night. I don't know how many times I've got up and sat by the window at the end of the hall, and waited for the moon to rise 'way out there, across the tracks! And I guess the people have got a lot to do with it, too. They're different out here. They're on the level; and that's the kind I like."

Billy laughed. "Yes," he agreed dryly, "they're all right as long as they're here, but the minute they cross the Missouri, headed East, they're the damndest liars on earth."

"Oh, I don't care what they do or say back there," Sadie exclaimed, undistressed by his careless use of the emphatic adjective. "It's what they are here—here where I am—that counts—with me."

Crossing the tracks ten minutes later, they saw twinkling out at them through a window of the eating house a beam of yellow light from the low-burning lamp over the lunch counter.

"Looks cheerful, don't it," Billy muttered under his breath.

"Is Charley there, do you suppose?" Sadie ventured.

"Not on your life," was his decisive reply. "I told

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him he could close up at midnight. He's probably dallying with the Blind Goddess over't the 'Monte.' Charley'll filter out of his job, one of these days, if he ain't careful," he added sourly.

Riding up to the door he struck it smartly with the butt of his quirt. There was no response from within. Through the window Sadie saw the glint of the lamp-light on the glassware of the counter, but the corners of the room were deep in shadow.

"Where's my key," Billy grumbled, fumbling beneath his coat. "Blame this thing," he exclaimed, and unbuckled his belt. "If you don't mind," he added, looking back, "will you wait here while I put up the horses?"

"Sure I will," Sadie replied, and quickly dismounted.

He handed down to her the key and his revolver. "I'd be a little careful of the cannon; it's loaded for bear," he warned.

"You needn't worry," she assured him, "I'll lay it on the counter and sit in a corner."

He caught up the rein of her pony then, and as she opened the door she heard the hoof-crunch of the cinders as they moved away. Turning up the wick of the lamp she deposited the gun, still in its holster of carved Mexican leather, on the counter at the side of a glass bell protecting a pyramid of dry "exhibition" doughnuts, as Billy called them. On the table, where the cook had left it, lay the "Magazine Supplement" of a recent San Francisco Sunday paper. The hands of the octagonal-faced clock, ticking loudly in the silence against the wall

under the stairs, indicated one-fifteen. No. 6, westbound, Sadie calculated, would pass in thirty-six minutes. Drawing a chair under the lamp she opened the paper and glanced indifferently over the smeary illustrations. A sensationally written article—embellished with drawings of a number of wiggly things—concerning the experiments of an unheard-of French scientist toward an artificial production of life, did not attract her. A brief, but none the less detailed description of a trousseau with which any bride to be might provide herself at a maximum cost of sixty-nine dollars and seventy-five cents was more interesting, and Sadie read it through. Finishing the article she became conscious that she was sleepy, and yawned luxuriously. She folded the paper and, rising, laid it on the counter. As she did so her eyes chanced to fall upon the revolver where it lay beside the bell glass. The lamplight twinkled on the tip of the blue-steel barrel projecting from the tube of the holster, and the pearl handle shone with an opalescent luster. The cowboy whom Billy had pointed out to her across the hall, back in San Luis, had worn a gun with a pearl handle, she remembered. She had seen it shine in the light as he sat on the table watching the dancers. And his face, smiling as it was then, appeared before her now. She closed her eyes and a little expression of wistfulness bent her lips.

She recalled the day, three months before, when Billy, with considerable pride, had explained to her the mechanism of his "cannon" as he always called it. Afterwards, from the mesa top she had pointed it off to the east and

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pulled the trigger. She could still hear its thunderous report and Billy's laughing declaration:

"If some guy back in Kansas City drops dead in a few minutes with a hole in his think tank, you'll be to blame."

He had taken the weapon then and taught her how to load it.

"It's just as well to know how to handle one," he had said.

Now, she wondered if there would ever come a time when she would rejoice to feel the cold touch of the fireshot pearl handle against her palm. Cautiously she drew the gun from its holster and examined it under the lamp. She was conscious that it had lost nothing in weight since that day on the mesa. Instinctively her hand closed around the grip and her forefinger rested gently against the trigger. Then, extending her arm she shut one eye, as she had seen Billy do, and sighted along the barrel at a spot on the further wall. But for the rush of feet outside at that instant she would, by the very fascination of the thing, have been irresistibly impelled to fire. As it was, however, she snatched up the folded paper, and flirting it out, thrust the gun beneath it, just as the girl Allie rushed breathlessly upon her.

"He's coming!" she cried, "he's coming—for Mr. Thompson." She slammed shut the door and shot the bolt. "Pull—pull down those curtains!" As one in a dream Sadie obeyed.

Allie had sunk weakly upon a chair, but now with reviving strength she ran on hysterically:

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"I heard him loading his gun. He didn't know. I ran out the back way. He kept mumbling to himself. Oh, he'd kill me if he knew." Suddenly her trembling ceased. Wide-eyed she looked around her. "Where is Mr. Thompson?" she whined.

Sadie, standing at the end of the counter, one hand clutching the rail, had only half heard her.

"What shall I do?" she cried. "He's out there! He doesn't know! How can I warn him?"

Her bloodless face was drawn and haggard; the violet-veined lips drooped over her eyes and her throat trembled. Allie, leaning forward, stared at her, marveling at what she took to be her calmness, but which was nothing less than freezing terror. And then Sadie's frightened eyes took note of the little hump in the paper lying on the counter, made by the gun beneath. With lightning quickness she snatched up the weapon and ran to the stairs.

"Come," she called, "up above—with me."

"What are you going to do?" wailed the tawdry creature behind her.

At the top Sadie turned upon her sharply. "Never mind," she snapped. "Go in there and shut the door. Don't make a sound."

Meekly Allie obeyed, and Sadie, the gun tight clutched in her hand, crept forward down the corridor. From one side of the open window at the end of the hall she looked down upon the siding, and the light in her watching eyes was such a light as men have died to see in the eyes of the women whom they love. Once, to-night, Billy had come

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to her assistance at the blackest moment she had ever known, and now beside the window, waiting, watching, she only hoped that she might be of help to him as he had been to her. "If he is the first to reach the door below," she thought, and a little prayer sprang from her heart:

"O God, let him!" she murmured.

And then upon her straining ears sounded the crunch of the cinders beneath a tread that she knew was not the tread of Billy. Her heart fell lead-like in her bosom. Brushing the back of an icy hand across her eyes she leaned forward. As she did so Lawton staggered around the end of the station and advanced upon the door, the moonlight flickering on the revolver in his hand. Sadie realized that the instant had arrived for her to act. Sinking upon her knees at the open window, she thrust her weapon across the sill and covered the unsuspecting man below. As he lifted his empty hand to try the door her sharp cry cut the silence:

"Drop that gun! Drop it!"

Drunk as he was Lawton realized the futility of resistance in the face of such a command. His fingers almost automatically relaxed their grip upon the weapon and it fell to his feet.

He drew back from the door then and stared about him.

"Where are yeh?" he called. "Why don't yeh show yerself?"

Unconsciously he looked up. His eyes bulging from their sockets fixed themselves upon the dipping barrel of

the gun. He saw nothing of Sadie, nothing even of her arm; he saw only a white hand firmly clutching a .45 trained upon himself. Something in the unwonted oddity of the situation appealed to him, befuddled as his senses were, and loud enough for Sadie to hear:

"I'll be damned," he exclaimed.

But none the less the purpose of that white hand and the gun it held was not lost upon him, and he made no effort to recover his own weapon from where it lay on the cinders at his feet.

Thus it was that Billy Thompson discovered him as he came whistling around the corner of the station five minutes later. At sight of the motionless figure, its eyes fixed on the upper window, Billy stopped short and stared. Then, clearly calm, a soft voice called down to him:

"It's all right, Billy; I've got him covered. He came to get you. That's his gun."

"Sadie!" Billy cried.

Upon the slow working mind of Lawton there dawned the meaning of the extraordinary predicament in which he found himself.

"I'll be damned," he muttered again in a tone of wondering awe. "Stuck up by a girl! I'll be damned!"

Billy quickly recovered Lawton's revolver.

"It's all right, Sadie," he called. "I've got him. You can come down now and open the door."

He heard the patter of her feet as she crossed the bare floor of the lunch room; the rasp of the bolt, and



"Lawton staggered around the end of the station . . .
revolver in his hand."

Sadie Intervenes

the next instant the door was flung back and she came forth into the moonlight.

"There she is, Red," Billy sneered, "there's the girl that's put a couple of crimps in you to-night. But she ain't going to have the trouble of doing it any more. Gimme that gun!"

Sadie handed it over to him without speaking. With a quick motion he "broke" Lawton's weapon and emptying the cartridges into his hand flung them far out across the tracks.

"Well, what you goin' t' do 'bout it?" Lawton growled.

"I'm going to give you the can, Reddy," was the calm reply. "It's been coming to you for a long time. To-night you're going to get it."

As he spoke the figure of a man appeared on the siding at the end of the station.

"That you, Harry?" Thompson called.

Robinson came quickly forward. Questioningly, he glanced from Lawton to the girl in the doorway.

"Don't stop to ask questions," was Billy's sharp command. "Get on the wire, get Hank Houston at Cottonwood."

"The sheriff?" the operator gasped.

"Yes; hurry up; No. 6 will be here in six minutes and Reddy don't want to miss it. Reddy's going to take a little trip; ain't you, Reddy?"

Lawton, leaning carelessly against the wall, his hands thrust deep in his pockets and the brim of his hat pulled low across his eyes, made no reply.

Robinson raised the window in his little boxlike office. A moment later the click of the telegraph key sounded sharp and clear.

"All ready," he announced.

"Hank Houston, Sheriff, Cottonwood." Billy enunciated each word with keen precision. "Am giving Red Lawton the can." He stopped. "Got it?" he called.

"Yes," came from the table over which Robinson bent, his finger trembling on the clicking key. "He leaves on No. 6 in four minutes. Got that?" The *click-click-click-clickety* of the instrument was the only sound, save the deep breathing of the tortured Lawton.

"All right," Robinson replied.

"He tried to get me. Just thought I'd let you know."

"O. K.," came presently out to him through the window.

"Sign it 'Billy Thompson,'" he ordered, "and let'er go."

Off in the east a long whistle, thrice repeated, shivered the night.

"Now do you get it, Reddy?" Thompson asked as the rails in front of him reflected the glimmer of the distant headlight. A sullen growl was the only response.

"Face that tank!" The command was sharp and decisive. Lawton obeyed, shrugging his shoulders. "March!" and he slouched off down the siding.

The long train, the curtained windows of the Pullmans gleaming black in the moonlight, rushed upon them and stopped. From the forward platform of the smoker

Sadie Intervenes

the conductor descended. Billy called to him and in a sentence explained the situation.

"Get aboard," he ordered Lawton then. With a snarl as of an animal goaded beyond endurance the latter swung suddenly about with upraised arms. But his huge hands fell limply as his eyes focused on the muzzle of Thompson's gun, and he heard the quiet reproof:

"No, you don't, Reddy; I was looking for that. Get aboard, I tell you!"

Hopelessly he obeyed.

Save for the news butcher, asleep with his feet on his basket, the smoker was deserted. Lawton was driven to a seat midway down the car. As he sank upon the cushion he lifted his eyes and for the first time to-night they met Thompson's squarely. But he did not speak.

"Now, Reddy, just a word." There was not much time and Billy ran on rapidly.

"Al Thayre's the conductor of this train and he's a friend of mine. He's got your gun. He'll slow down at Mercedes and you can get off or be thrown off, just as you please; that's fifty miles away. He'll give you your gun if he don't forget it. Bagdad ain't big enough for all of us, and I ain't going to leave for some time. You know what'll happen to you down 't Mercedes if you try any of your flossy work there. When they give you a free ride out of that town it'll be in the baggage car and you'll be layin' down. Understand?"

Up ahead the engine bell clanged. Thompson backed slowly down the aisle.

"Good-by," he called from the platform and clutching the rail swung himself from the moving train directly in front of the eating-house door.

Sadie was still there, talking to Robinson.

"It must be getting late," Thompson observed as he came up to them. "Guess I'll get to bed."

The hint was sufficient for the operator. "Good-night," he said with a chuckle. "It was a good job, Billy."

Thompson followed Sadie into the lunch room.

"Who put you wise to what he was up to?" he asked. From the foot of the stairs she turned and their eyes met in the lamplight across the counter.

"Allie," she replied, and looked down.

With great deliberation Billy closed the door and locked it.

"Where is she now?" he asked, as he raised the shade at the front window.

"Upstairs. She's going to stay with me."

He did not look at her, waiting for his word of reproof, as he turned down the light.

"You can tell her if you want to," he said slowly, "that Lawton ain't likely to bother her any more—nor Bagdad either. That's all."

She wished that he would only look at her, that he might read in her eyes, at least, the gratitude that she could not express in words, but he did not so much as glance at her again.

"Good-night," she bade him, and wearily mounted the stairs.

Sadie Intervenes

Later, Billy fell asleep to the sound of low-voiced conversation in Sadie's room. Awakening early he turned, and raising himself upon one elbow, gazed out the window into the morning's shining face. From below came the sound of clattering dishes in the kitchen; then the slam of the back door. A moment later he saw the slight figure of a girl in a tawdry tinsel costume, pitifully garish in the light of day, speeding across Main Street, and at sight of her, a frown gathered in his eyes. He kicked away the gray blanket angrily. Sitting on the edge of the bed he bent his elbows on his knees and hid his face in his hands. Sadie was singing in the lunch room below. Lifting his head, Billy listened, smiling. Then, suddenly, he sat upright and pulled a long breath, and, brushing his hand across his eyes, murmured: "What's the use? What's the use?"—hopelessly.

CHAPTER X

AN EXCHANGE OF CONFIDENCES

AFTER breakfast Billy accompanied Skinny McGregor to the latter's tent where he remained until shortly before noon. Thereafter, until Charley announced dinner, Sadie heard him in his room. It was apparent to her that he had taken this means of avoiding her and frustrating any attempt on her part to speak to him in any sense privately. She had a great deal to say to him; and what she would say concerned chiefly the girl whom he had seen fleeing across Main Street before Bagdad—and Bagdad did not sleep late—had aroused itself for the day. However, she did not intend to permit him to escape, and therefore, after dinner, she seated herself at one of the tables in the lunch room, and proceeded patiently to polish the silverware with which it was furnished. A little after three o'clock she had the satisfaction of hearing the door of Billy's room creak and his footfalls in the corridor. As he appeared at the top of the narrow stairs she looked up, smiling. Perhaps it was her smile that reassured him, for he came slowly down. He was in riding clothes, and his wide-brimmed gray hat, she observed, was quite fresh. His shirt, of which she was permitted a glimpse at the throat opening

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of his khaki coat, was more dazzling than any he had worn before.

"Can I speak to you a minute?" she asked, a little fearfully, perhaps, for Billy thus arrayed was in a sense an imposing figure. A frown swept across his brow as she spoke, and perceiving it her own eyes twitched. But his answer was reassuring.

"Sure; what is it?"

He came around in front of the counter, wiping his hands on a blue-checked handkerchief.

"Were you going anywhere?" she inquired as he drew out a chair opposite her.

"Nowhere 'special," was his indefinite reply.

Sadie put aside the chamois and the box of silver polish with deliberation.

"Promise not to cut in till I'm through?" she said.

He smiled quizzically and a sigh of relief escaped her.

"Is it as serious as all that?" he asked.

"It's about Allie," she declared frankly, and let fall her eyes. She did not observe Billy's impatient move, nor the sneer that bent his lips, but as he started to speak she looked up quickly.

"You ain't going to interrupt, you know," she reminded him.

What he would have said died on his lips and he nodded.

"She and I had a long talk last night," Sadie went on. "She told me all about it."

Billy's contemptuous smile annoyed her, but she continued with a faint note of reproof in her voice:

Sadie

"Please don't look like that. She's not so bad—really—after all." She hesitated. Producing "the makin's" Billy proceeded with calm indifference to roll a cigarette.

"And maybe if she'd talked to you, like she did to me," Sadie continued, "you'd feel like I do about her. No, she didn't lie," she quickly declared, meeting the look of questioning doubt in his eyes. "Girls can't lie to me—Billy. I know when they're doing it every time. And she didn't cry neither. She just talked. And she was as calm as I am this minute. Don't you suppose I know?" Sadie gave her pompadour a little upward toss, meant to dispel any doubt he might have of her deeper understanding of wayward femininity.

"Do you know anything about her?" she asked, "except what you've seen here'n Bagdad?"

He shook his head, and contemplated the glowing end of his cigarette.

"Just think of it! She's only twenty," Sadie exclaimed. "She's three years younger'n I am; and she don't know a tenth as much, if I do say it. She's just a kid, Billy. Why, good Lord, she ain't had time to be *all* lost—yet! Oh, yes, I know what you're going to say, she's got a flying start and all that, but Billy"—she leaned toward him, across the table—"it ain't too late now *if you'll only do it.*"

Thompson stared hard at her.

"Her mother died when she was fourteen," Sadie went on, unconsciously following with a finger the flower pattern in the tablecloth. "Maybe you know what it

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means when a girl that age loses her mother, 'specially when the old man's all to the bad from booze. Why, Allie's grown up out here'n the desert just like a cactus. Is it any wonder? The way she's carried on, I mean? If you'd been a girl like that, Billy Thompson, you'd have done the same, and so would I!"

He would have spoken again, but Sadie held up her hand. "Listen. I know you think it's funny for me to care anything about her, but I do. Men never do; they can't help girls—like Allie, I mean. And women won't as a general thing. Nobody can, really, I guess, but just another girl—one that understands. That's what always used to make me sore on the church folks back East. I've seen 'em work. Some nice, near-sighted old gentleman with scrawny side-whiskers would say 'Oh' and 'Ah' to a girl and quote from the Bible. What does a girl like Allie know 'bout the Bible? What does she *want* to know 'bout the Bible? What's the Bible got to do with it *anyway*? She can't eat it, can she? And then I've seen nice old ladies in spectacles come along holding their skirts back and pat girls on the head and tell 'em fairy stories and give 'em a tract! That helps a lot now, don't it? Do you know what Allie'd do with a tract? She'd make curl papers out of it. And so would I. What a girl that's down wants is the sympathy of another girl; one that would be down herself if she hadn't just been lucky, to show her the way up—like only a girl can. That's why I took Allie in last night and talked to her. We didn't bawl over it; you didn't hear any sobbing, did you? I didn't read the riot act to her

Sadie

either. We just talked low and earnest, and then we went to sleep—" There came a little catch in her voice and she dropped her eyes—" with our arms around each other."

Turning, Billy stared out through the window, into the desert's dusty face.

"And it's because I know Allie's got a chance that I wanted to talk to you," Sadie was saying. "All she needed was a hunch. I gave it to her. I'm a girl, Billy, and I know." Then, drawing a long breath: "Billy," she said, "can't you send her to Mr. Tunnison, up at Cottonwood? He wants a girl. I told Allie I'd ask you."

Breathlessly she hung upon his answer. At his hesitation her heart dropped. Then his eyes met hers and smiled into them.

"Sadie"—leaning forward, one of his hands closed over one of hers where it lay on the table—"Sadie, do you think there's anything anybody wouldn't do for you, if you wanted 'em to?"

At the moment the deeper meaning of his question was lost upon her. Drawing her hand from under his:

"You will?" she exclaimed.

"Sure!" He flicked his half-burned cigarette through the open window.

She sprang to her feet. "O Billy!" she cried, "I'm so glad I could kiss you!"

He forced a laugh at that and looked away.

"And Allie wants you to tell him all about it," she ran on. "Will you?"

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"Yes," he promised. "It'll be all right with Tunnison," he assured her, "I know him. He's one of the best there is out here. When can she go?" he asked.

"To-day. I'm going over to tell her now." And before he could restrain her she had snatched up her sun-bonnet from where it lay at the end of the counter and run out upon the siding. He sent a telegram to Tunnison then, and that same afternoon joined Sadie on the siding as No. 2 pulled in. Together they waved "Good-by" to Allie who stood on the platform of the "free chair car."

"Did you see she didn't have any paint on?" Sadie asked as they walked back to the eating house. "I made her throw it away."

"I ought to have told Tunnison in that letter I gave her," Billy declared, "that if anything happens, you're to blame."

"But there won't anything happen," she assured him.

At the end of the counter in the lunch room he turned to her and said:

"It was game of you to do what you did last night. I wasn't going to say——"

"You needn't," she interrupted him, as the color came into her cheeks. "But I wish you could have seen him when I told him to drop the gun. I guess he thought it was an angel holding him up."

"It was!" With which declaration Billy ran swiftly up the stairs to his room, leaving Sadie staring after him, too dazed to reply.

Thus it was that Reddy Lawton, imitation badman,

Sadie

and his one-time girl, deserted Bagdad, by differing, but equally effective means, nor did Bagdad mourn.

Much to Sadie's embarrassment—real embarrassment, it may be said in passing—her adventure at Gonzales's, and later her exploit at the eating house became common knowledge among the residents of the desert town. She was confident that Billy had said nothing, nor had he, but by that wireless telegraphy which cuts and crosses the most desolate places the story passed up and down the Territory. Sadie was, in a measure, sure that Robinson had told of the episode at the station, though when confronted with the charge, he denied it, albeit with a grin.

One afternoon, a fortnight later, as she was passing the "Monte," Fernandez, who chanced to be standing in the doorway said to her:

"Wait; I have something from my wife."

Sadie accepted the parcel that he handed her with certain misgivings.

"You hear from Red's girl?" the Mexican inquired, showing his teeth. Sadie blushed.

"Mr. Thompson had a letter from Tunnison," she told him. "She's delivering the goods all right."

Fernandez nodded wisely.

"Did he hear from Red?" he asked.

Sadie laughed. "I guess not," she replied.

Fernandez spat over his shoulder. "You did a good job," he declared.

She went her way then, conscious that the eyes of every man and woman in the street were upon her. In her room she took the newspaper wrapping from Fer-

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andez's gift. It was a breadth of white linen, a shirt-waist pattern, exquisitely designed in drawn-work, for Mrs. Fernandez had originally come from the City of Mexico, and had learned the art of linen-working when a child. Indeed her close application to the work in later years had resulted in her losing the sight of one eye, though Sadie did not know this.

She displayed the pattern to Billy, protesting against Mrs. Fernandez having given it to her.

"It just shows you how much she thinks of you," he said.

Nor was he surprised on another day when Skinny McGregor came across to the eating house during Sadie's absence bent beneath the weight of a rolled Navajo blanket of startling pattern.

"She's brought stuff over to the tent for me to eat a dozen times, Billy," the little *croupier* explained, "and it's just to pay her back. I got it of Navajo John's squaw. It looks like an old one to me, don't it to you?"

"What'd you have to pay for it, Skinny?" Billy asked, examining the weave critically.

"Thirty dollars."

Billy looked up, dumfounded.

"Don't worry," McGregor assured him, "I had the price."

And together they spread the blanket on the bare floor of Sadie's chamber. When she returned, an hour later, Billy waited below, and as the door of her room creaked, he had the satisfaction of hearing her little squeal when her eyes beheld the brilliant covering.

Sadie

"You oughta stayed," he told Skinny that evening in the "Monte."

"I'm glad she liked it," was all the little fellow said.

It was the same with Sansome. One day he brought her a huge yellow jardiniere, and on a Sunday afternoon they dug up a cactus together and planted it therein.

"You'll have a regular boudoir if you keep it up," Billy prophesied, and Sadie laughed.

"Seems as though they were all coming in a bunch," she said; "anybody'd think I was going to be married——"

"And setting up housekeeping with a Navajo and a cactus," Billy put in. "That's a Navajo more'n most of 'em start on, out here. Usually it's just the cactus," he declared.

And so, in a way, Sadie was not surprised that ere long Billy himself should contribute to her collection of affection tokens. His gift came "franked" from Chicago. It was contained in a box about eight inches long and four wide. Still sealed, as he had received it, Sadie found it on her pillow one evening with a bit of paper attached on which was written in Billy's scrawling hand:

"Much obliged."

Her fingers trembled the least bit as she tore off the outer wrapping, and a mist came into her eyes. With lingering anticipation she removed the cover of the inner green box. There, half hidden in a holster of delicately traced pigskin, lay a "gun." It was of small calibre—"girl's size" as Billy later explained—but built in exact imitation of his own heavier weapon which she had used

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on one occasion to such an excellent end. The yellow lamplight twinkled on the pearl grip; and the trceries of the trigger guard and cylinder were of gold.

Sadie came downstairs dangling the weapon in one hand, its holster in the other.

"Billy—" Her voice caught. "Billy, it's—it's beautiful."

Perhaps he had never looked more foolish than at that moment.

"You can't tell when you may need one—out here," he muttered, avoiding her eyes. "Lemme see it."

He tested the mechanism. "It seems to be all right. I ordered it from a catalogue and mostly they're skins. It'll 'blow,' though, I guess."

"It's beautiful," Sadie repeated.

She fondled it as another girl might have caressed an exquisite piece of jewelry.

"Can't we go out and try it some day?" she asked.

"Sure," Billy replied. "We can go to-morrow."

And they did; and on many days thereafter they might have been seen, on the edge of the mesa, their figures sharply cut against the cloudless sky, until Billy informed Sadie at last that she could kill a rattler from a running horse as easily as any cowpuncher. Her delight vanished, however, a moment later when he informed her that anybody might accomplish that seemingly impossible feat owing to the overwhelming desire of the rattler itself to be destroyed.

"He does the aiming, you don't," he explained. "Which goes to show what a blamed fool a rattler is."

Sadie

Yet, after all, Sadie wished that Billy had not given her the gun; not because it was a gun, but because it was a gift from him. If before she had doubted that he loved her, she was certain now, and the thought in a way grieved her, for she told herself what most she wanted from him was an open, candid friendship; no more; for beyond that she had nothing to give him in return.

On a Thursday, a fortnight later, as she was returning from little McGregor's tent where he lay miserably sick, she happened to glance through the lunch-room window as she came down the cinder path at the end of the building. She had left her gloves on the counter, where Billy had found them. He did not lift his eyes as she passed the window, and she was glad therefor. He sat bent over in a chair drawn out from one of the tables, his forearms on his knees, and in his hands he held the gloves, caressing them tenderly. In the little instant given her to see, he crushed them both between his palms and pressed them to his lips.

"O Billy!" Sadie sighed under her breath, and gathering up her skirts ran back down the siding toward the water tank. A moment she hesitated doubtfully, then turning came slowly on, whistling blithely. At the corner of the structure she commenced to sing. When, a moment later, she appeared in the doorway Billy glanced up from the paper he was reading. The gloves lay at the end of the counter where she had left them. As she passed him and ran up the stairs he only nodded. But when he heard her door close he threw down the

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paper impatiently and stood up muttering under his breath. Disconsolately he shambled forth into the outer glare, the brim of his gaudily ribboned straw dipping over his eyes, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his check-flannel trousers.

"You're a damn fool!" he grumbled as he crossed Main Street. "You're nutty." It was not Sadie, however, watching him from the window of her little room, whom he thus reproved, but himself.

If he would only speak, she thought, and lay bare to her his heart, she might make him understand; but until he should she must keep silent—conventionally silent—conscious of what he suffered.

To the smallest details she recalled what he had done for her from the day of her arrival here. Always, and in a multitude of ways, he had sought to add to her comfort. In great degree he had striven to lighten the burden of her tasks, slight as they would otherwise have been. Sometimes, indeed, with so little to do, she had called herself a pensioner. But Billy always scowled when she referred to her idleness in his presence. With a shiver she recalled the episode at San Luis. She saw his face now, as it had appeared to her in the dim light of the corridor over the shoulder of the gurgling Lawton. And then, in front of both their faces, hiding them, appeared another—a youthful, clean-cut face crowned with yellow hair, just visible beneath the sombrero pushed well back upon his head—the face of him whom Thompson had called "Curly" Watrous.

"Billy," she whispered to her heart, "I wish I *could*

love you!" and turned from the window, just as he vanished through the narrow door of Skinny's tent.

Perhaps it was natural, under the circumstances, that Thompson should have made no secret of his heart's desire from the little *croupier*. Something told him that Skinny would understand; and therein he was right. Skinny *did* understand, but in a way that Thompson could not foresee.

One other day, late in the winter of that year, the two sat together in McGregor's tent. For a month Bagdad had slept save when some enthusiastic prospector descended, with a golden narrative, from the Northern fields. At such times it awakened for the moment, but presently drowsed again.

The sun swung low in the shimmering sky and the gentle breeze fluttered the little flag above the entrance of the tent. For ten minutes Billy had sat in silence, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, staring off into the South. Behind him Skinny lay back in his low steamer chair. With a burning intensity of gaze he studied the back of Billy's head as if he would pierce through into the turbulent brain it held, and read the thoughts that crowded one another there.

"Skinny"—Billy did not change his attitude; indeed, he spoke as if addressing himself. "Skinny, ain't it funny how a fellow feels—sometimes?"

McGregor's eyes narrowed to slits. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"A year ago—I didn't have an idea in my head," the other confessed, "but now"—he hesitated.

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"Billy"—McGregor's voice was thin and low-pitched—"Billy, why don't you and Sadie hit it off together?"

Thompson could never know the pang the question cost the little fellow.

He did not turn, but continued to stare unseeingly off into the South.

"That's just it; why don't we?" was his dreary reply.

"Have you ever asked her?"

Thompson's shoulders lifted.

"It wouldn't do any good," he announced, "I know that."

"How?"

"Instinct, I guess; and the way she acts."

Skinny sat up then and clasped his thin hands around one knee.

"She likes you; anybody could see it," he declared.

"She likes me well enough, I guess," the other replied, "but that don't help any. She likes everybody, and everybody likes her. She ain't any different with me, for all I see her so much, than she is with Charley or Robinson, or Sansome—or you." He looked around as he finished and their eyes met. In Skinny's flickered the light of a little smile.

"She's had a lot of chances," Billy continued. "Lord, I showed up my hand before the last card was down. But she didn't take any advantage of that."

"That's because she only knows how to play a square game," Skinny put in.

"There's no use trying to cover it up, or lie about it," Billy confessed, "she's for mine; only she don't see it."

Sadie

She's in a class by herself. The patterns of her have been lost. How many girls'd do what she did for Allie, do you suppose? Not a damn one! That's how many. And what'd the average girl done in her place the night Lawton was out gunnin' for me? Keeled over! That's what; keeled over! And they'd have laid there like they'd been hit with a club till somebody'd poured a pail of water on 'em. And she's been up against it ever since she's been out here, in a way, too. But, Skinny," he declared with solemn intensity, "she's stood the acid. She's stood it better'n any tenderfoot that ever hit this country before. Fact is," he added, "she ain't a tenderfoot, nor never was. She's a thoroughbred—the real thing—clear through."

"I guess that's right," Skinny agreed as the other arose. "I guess she is."

"Oh, well," the latter mourned drearily, "what's the use of anything? Nothing. That's what. Forget it, Skinny; forget it. I'm going to. Maybe one or the other of us'll pull freight out of here before long; you can't ever tell. And whether *we* hit it off or not, *she'll* hit it off with somebody. That's a cinch! Girls like her don't have to hang on the tree long before somebody picks 'em. Good-by." He strode out of the tent whistling bravely.

For a long time Skinny lay back motionless in his chair, his thin hands lying listlessly on the narrow arms.

"Sadie," he whispered to his heart, as the lids drooped drowsily over his burning, sunken eyes, "Sadie, everybody loves you and I—guess—I—love—you—most—of—all."

CHAPTER XI

A LETTER BACK HOME

A LETTER from Sadie Morrison, at Bagdad, to Frances Finlay, care Kelsey's No. 1, Kansas City, Missouri.

DEAREST FAN: Your letter made me homesick for fair. But I'm awful grateful for it "allee samee," as that fat Chink in the laundry on the corner of Ninth Street used to say. When Frank Sansome brought it over day before yesterday—he's the postmaster as well as the druggist of this place—I took it straight upstairs—you ought to see my room, Fan—and settled right down by the window to read it. What an old skate Grace is! Going to be married and not say a word about it till she had all her duds ready! No, I don't place the fellow, even if he does work for the Carter System. There's more than a million folks working for these people, and planted way off here where I am, I ain't supposed to know them all, am I? I suppose Grace has got heaps of swell clothes. I wish I could see her things. The only man I know back in the head office, where you say her fellow works, is Mr. Stevens. He's the superintendent and gave me my job. I wish Grace was going to marry him. He seemed real nice. He's an awful swell

dresser, too. But Mr. Thompson told me he had a wife and three children, so I guess that bars him. It wouldn't *some*, maybe; but he ain't that kind. I guess you've never seen him. I don't believe he takes his lunch at old No. 1. Lordy, Fan, how funny it seems to talk about the place. I know it was a hundred years ago I worked there. And yet if I shut my eyes I can see everything as plain as day; from the pie-cuts on the counter to that yellow-headed Madge O'Neill in the cashier's cage chewing gum and making eyes at all the fellows. I don't see what so many of them saw in her, do you? She had awful teeth. You say everything's about the same. Well, that's the way it always was; generally the girls have stuck. Sooner or later, though, I'm going to get you out here. I've had my eyes open over a year now and the minute anything really good shows up I'll put you on. I know you'd like it. There's something about this country that's lots cleaner than back East, and the folks are different, too. Just now, though, in Bagdad things are pretty quiet. Nearly everybody's hoping for a gold rush. There's lots of rich mines going to be discovered up North, and we all think Bagdad'll have a show before long. That's about the only excuse the town's got for living just now. Some of the people I know have gone off prospecting and I hope they'll strike it rich. Jerry Rowley, the proprietor of a general store here, is one. Did I tell you about how I saw him the first day I hit town, and how he came over to the eating house that night to call, with a bun and his best clothes on? Well, he did. He quit drinking, though, before he went

A Letter Back Home

North. I hope he's stuck it out. Mr. Fernandez here told me he had a letter from him last week and he's coming back soon, now. He was in Salt Lake when he wrote. He left one of his ponies here for me to ride and I've done a lot of it. Easter I rode down to San Luis to church. I wish you'd been there to see the celebration.

Say, Fan, remember what I wrote you about Mr. Thompson last fall? Well, he's got it bad. It's as clear as a sunset here in the desert. Anybody could see it with their eyes shut, but I couldn't for a long time. I do now, though. I guess I'm half fool anyway. And listen—it's over me. He ain't told me about it, but he's got it just the same. And I'm up against it good and hard. I can't frame a way to let him down for the life of me. I like him. Oh, I like him lots and lots, but that ain't enough. I can't ever marry him. And sometimes it seems to me he must feel the way I think about it without his ever having mentioned it. Why wouldn't he say something if he didn't? Don't you suppose he does? He just mopes like Maggie used to when she'd had a fight with her fellow. Remember? I feel awful sorry for him, but I don't see what I can do. Maybe, though, I'll be able to fix it up one of these days. You see I want him to like me—but that's all. I'll let you know how it comes out.

Say, what would you think of me working in a gambling house? Wouldn't it jar you! Way along last summer when I first came, Skinny McGregor—remember, I told you he runs the wheel over at the "Monte," Mr. Fernandez's place—told me I could spin the thing

some night, if I wanted to, when there's a lot around. I guess if the town don't wake up before long I'll have to do it just for excitement. You see out here the lid ain't screwed down as tight as it is in the towns back East. Everybody gambles that's got anything to gamble with, but it don't seem to hurt them. It ain't anything out of the way to see a woman in a saloon, either. Mrs. Fernandez, and she's as nice a greaser lady as there is here, helps her husband out sometimes when there's a rush. I just thought I'd tell you so if the *Star* ever has an article in it about "The Girl Gambler of Bagdad," you'll know it's me.

Gee, I wish you were out here, we'd have a picnic! Only I suppose you'd get married before you'd been in the country a week. There's lots of chances, Fan; about a million right around Bagdad. It's a wonder some of the left-overs back East wouldn't come on out here. There might be something doing for them if they did. There ain't very many women in the town. Nice ones I mean. They're mostly the other kind. But we don't see much of them. I could show you any number of fine fellows that ought to be married to a girl like you and would be, too, if the girls were on hand. I just hear you say: "Why don't she nail one herself?" I guess I ain't the marrying kind, Fan. You heard about the little boy that bawled for the moon. Well, that was me.

By the way, you haven't mentioned J. L. once. Do you ever see him? Is he still at Frieberg's? Did I tell you how I met him right under the electric light on the corner above No. 1 the night I left K. C., and how we

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had a heart to heart? *I* did the talking. He just *listened*. I've often wondered if he's still there. Some day I'll tell you all about it. It ain't much though. I guess I never did care anything about him; anyway not as strong as I thought I did, or you girls thought. I'm just curious to know what's happened to him, that's all.

You ought to see the present Billy—that's Mr. Thompson—sent way to Chicago to get for me. It's a gun, a revolver, I mean. It's the prettiest one you ever saw. He's taught me how to shoot it and we've been over on the mesa a lot of times trying it. I can hit a card quite a long ways off. Some day, if I keep on maybe I'll be able to shoot the spot off an ace. Then I suppose I'll join a wild-west show, and you'll see me in a leather skirt, with fringe on my stockings, breaking glass balls.

Gee, I'd like to go to a show once more. Any old thing would do. I guess I could even stand that rotten vaudeville they used to have out at the Park. Wasn't it the limit? Oh, and say, I want to tell you about the dream I had one night last week. I thought you and Grace and I went to see Sothern. I don't remember the show only Sothern was all the time looking for the heroine. She didn't come out once. Nobody seemed to think it was funny, and then in the second act Sothern came down in the audience looking everywhere for her. I could see him just as plain as anything, from where we sat, back in the circle. All of a sudden I thought I was laying down on a sofa, just like the one you had in your room, with red roses on it. And while I was laying there, along he came and saw me. Ain't he got just the

glorousest eyes, though! Seemed as though he looked right through me. I couldn't move a muscle, I was so skairt. He came closer and closer and then he leaned over me. His whole face changed and I realized he'd found her and I was It. Then I woke up. Wasn't that the limit? To wake up right then I mean. Soon as I could I went to sleep again just to see how it all came out, but there was nothing doing. Maybe I wasn't mad!

No, I don't get homesick very often. I did when I read your letter, though. And once in a while, when I'm upstairs nights, and it's all so still and kind of hollow, and I get to thinking of old K. C., and the good times we used to have, it makes me want to bawl good. I get so hungry to see you and Grace again. Sometimes I shut my eyes and imagine we're all together again, out at the Park Sunday afternoon. I can almost hear the band. But I guess I'll never go back. There's nothing to take me, and I like it lots out here. If mother was right maybe it would be different. She don't get any better. I don't believe she ever will. I hear about her from the Sisters now and then. Sister Hortense wrote me in the winter that maybe she'd live till next year. When you're over that way, why don't you go in and see her, if it ain't too much trouble? She probably wouldn't know you, but you could write me how she looked anyway. I was figuring up only the other day how I could get some material for two or three new shirt waists and send the Sisters the money, too. But I guess I don't need the shirt waists very much after all. I don't have much use for money out here. There's nothing to buy

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and my washing goes in with the house stuff. I go round looking like any old thing, almost. What are they showing that's new this spring? I'll bet the windows are swell, long about now, with fancy things for summer.

You know that old tan skirt of mine, the full one I mean, that Grace wanted me to sell her? I made it over to ride in and it looks real good. I ride straddle; everybody does out here. The first one I had I made of blue denim, but it all wore white from rubbing on the saddle and made me look as though I'd sat down in a pan of flour. The serge is wearing lots better. My blue-flannel waist is just the thing, too, and when I get all rigged up I'm a picture no artist could paint. I've got a wide-brimmed felt hat, kind of buff color with a leather band, and I wear a red silk handkerchief around my neck. The sun is so hot you know. I've seen it a hundred and twelve here at noon. Then with my tan shoes, and gloves with fringe on them, I'm a show. A regular cowboy, especially when I wear the gun Billy gave me. Talking about cowboys, Fan, I saw one at a dance I went to down at San Luis that would get your tag if you'd seen him. I guess he comes from somewhere back East. He looked like he did, anyway. He was one of the handsomest fellows I ever saw. Remember that play you and I went to once? Something about "Ceasar" somebody. The last name sounded like "banana." Well, he looked just like the actor that played it, only he was younger and a blonde. Billy knows him. His name's Watrous. They call him "Curly" on account of his hair. I saw him just that one night, and he didn't see me. He went off up

North prospecting and probably I'll never lay eyes on him again. That's the way it goes out here.

Frank Sansome brought me a cactus blossom yesterday, so I guess summer's about due. If you think it's hot down in No. 1 in July you ought to come out here. Billy says Bagdad's right on the rim of hell—sometimes he swears perfectly awful, but he does it so gentlemanly you *can't* get mad—and that if somebody gave it a good push it would go over. A hundred and ten is nothing; and I've seen it a hundred and five at midnight. That's going some, ain't it? but as Jerry Rowley said, the night he came to see me with a shine, you never sweat. How I hate that word; don't you? On the square, Fan, I'd rather have a hundred and ten here any time than eighty-five in K. C. It's so dry. Beer costs a dollar a bottle. What do you think of that? The eating house is the only place in town that has any ice. They throw some off of No. 5 every day. But it's a snap for me after all. The only time there's ever a rush is when the men up at the borax mine come down once a month after pay day. It gets a little lively then, sometimes. Poor fellows, it's the only fun they have, and I don't blame them much if they do get teaed—Billy calls it "soused"—when they hit town. I would, too, I guess, if I had to work like they do. It goes to a hundred and forty sometimes where they are. How'd you like that?

Well, I've written a lot but I ain't said much, have I? Some afternoon, when things are quiet, I wish you'd go into the People's Cut Rate Drug Store next to Frieberg's

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and get a pineapple sundae on me. Gee, I wish I had one this minute! I've forgotten how they taste; but I could eat a million. And say, Fan, if you *do* hear anything about J. L. let me know, won't you? But don't tell him where I am. I guess maybe he's never asked, or you'd have said something about it. It won't do any good for him to know; he'd only write me a letter, and if I ever got a letter from him, *now*, I guess I'd pass away. Give my love to Grace and tell her I hope she'll be awful happy. She'll make him a good wife, whoever he is. I wish I could see her married, but I'll think of her, anyway. Maybe they'll come out here over the line on their wedding trip. He could get passes, easy as anything, if he's with the System. Why don't you tell her? Gee, I'd like to see her get off of No. 8 some day. I'd hug her to death. But if I don't stop writing I *will* get homesick. Lots of love. Good-by,

SADE.

P. S. I wish you'd go to the embroidery counter at Mason's and get me six yards of some pretty beading; not too wide. I'll send you stamps when you tell me how much it is.

S.

CHAPTER XII

AN INTERCEPTED MESSAGE

FOR quite half an hour no one had spoken. Their community of discontent made speech unnecessary. Billy Thompson sat on the bench beside the water pail, his feet outstretched, his chin sunk in the loose bosom of his pink-striped shirt. His mood was perhaps indicated the more accurately by the band around the flat, hard crown of the straw hat that lay on his knees. It was lavender. Robinson, the operator, was hunched over his table writing a letter "back home." Every now and then he would brush the back of his hand across his freckled forehead, and wipe the swiftly drying pen on his red hair. The light, striking the key and sounder, glinted golden. At the window, gazing abstractedly into the face of the dozing desert, sat Skinny. Occasionally he would cough. That and the rasp of Robinson's pen scratching the yellow paper were the only sounds in the little, oven office. Outside the sun poured of its brazen flood across the sand. In the distance the air trembled. The face of the land seemed to shrivel in the blighting glare.

A tiny lizard crept to the edge of the station shadow, and lay there like an ill-shaped, animated emerald, dart-

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ing forth its slim, sharp tongue, and staring, unwinking, at the brilliant sky. The metallic twinkle of the light upon its back caught Skinny's eye, and leaning across the sill of the always open window he took careful aim and spat—missing. The lizard did not move.

"Look a' the blamed thing!" McGregor sneered.

At the sudden exclamation Robinson dropped his pen and swore temperately; Billy looked up.

"What is it?" the latter asked.

"Out there," Skinny replied, with a jerk of his head. Robinson and Billy craned over the table.

Skinny tried a second time and missed.

"Bet you two bits I can hit him," Billy dared.

"Take you." The operator covered the coin that was laid upon the table. "You hold the stakes, Skinny."

With delicate pains Billy sighted over the sill, worked his mouth rapidly a moment, closed one eye, and fired.

"Yah!" cried Robinson, "gimme the money." For the manager had missed the mark by quite six inches.

Then Robinson tried, and failed. The little unblinking splotch of emerald at the edge of the cinder siding seemed to bear a charmed life.

"Can't none of you do it?" Skinny declared.

Rising in his wrath, Billy laid violent hands upon the telegrapher's ink bottle, and, forgetting that it was uncorked, cast it swiftly through the window. "Take that!" he cried. The little animal was drenched with the violet fluid, but still it did not move, only darted its tiny tongue the faster. It was even too hot for the lizard to take notice of an unexpected bath, or for Robinson to

complain that now he would have to crawl across Main Street to Sansome's for another bottle.

Skinny chuckled and coughed. Billy glanced at him and grinned. Robinson wiped the pen on his hair and thrust it into the potato on the table.

"Ain't it hell?" he inquired tersely, *apropos* of nothing.

"Near's I want to get to it," was Thompson's sour reply.

"It all goes to show," Skinny contributed.

"What?" asked Billy.

"Th' sorter place this is." He straightened in his chair. "Here's the three shinin' lights of this seethin' metropolis—loveliest village of the desert, nit!—settin' here, twiddlin' their thumbs, and spittin' at a lizard, 'cause there ain't another blamed durn thing to do. And they can't even hit the lizard! Look at the son-of-a-gun out there. A hole like this is only fit for him; him and the rattlers, and a rat now and then. What's the use? Huh? What's the use?"

"And that ain't no lullaby neither," agreed the operator as he reached down into the breast pocket of his blue-flannel shirt for "the makin's."

"'Member that railroad guy that dropped off here last spring, Skinny?" Billy inquired.

"The one with the whiskers and the checkered pants? Uh huh. Why?"

"Nothin,' only he had it doped out 'bout right. Said if a fellow wanted to get acquainted with himself, Bagdad was the place. Said he'd have plenty of time, and noth-

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ing to distract his attention." Billy twisted the huge ring on his thumb.

"He was a wise guy; that feller," Robinson agreed, bending the end of his cigarette, and feeling in the hip pocket of his corduroys for a match. "A wise guy, for sure."

Just then the open sounder on the table commenced to click.

"Aw, shut up, cancha," he snarled. His cigarette alight he was reaching out to close the instrument when a strange thing occurred. He became as a man suddenly petrified. His hand froze above the key. Cocking his head and squinting at nothing out the window, he listened breathlessly to the story the little insensate machine clicked out upon the stillness. McGregor and Thompson gazed at him. As a break came in the clicks he smiled, and reached out for paper and pencil without ceasing to stare out into the golden, mote-shot sunlight. To Skinny and Billy, watching, he seemed to write automatically. It was very like a performance of planchette. On the shelf, over the table, the nickle alarm clock ticked on. Billy and Skinny were grinning now. For quite five minutes the operator continued to scrawl the sheet beneath his hand. Then, suddenly, the sounder clicked sharply—more sharply—half a dozen times and fell silent. With a long whistle Robinson leaned back in his chair and solemnly inquired of the glittering sunlight:

"Well—what—th'—h——, d'yeh—think—o'—that?"

"Aw, come outer your trance," Skinny cried. "What's it all about? Earthquake?"

"Lemme see it," exclaimed Thompson, and snatched up the sheet.

Robinson was upon his feet at once.

"What you doin'?" he protested. "You can't read it. Give it to me!" He plucked the yellow paper from Billy's hand. "Listen," he commanded. "Who said this town was on the bum? Who said there wasn't anything to do but spit at lizards——"

"For God's sake read it if you're going' to!" Thompson broke in.

"Listen, then; I didn't get it all. It was going through to Phoenix—line down North somewhere—washout—cloud busted probably—but I got enough—listen:

"... greatest strike in the history of Western mining made here this week, five miles north of Furnace Creek"——

"Whoopee!" Billy broke in.

"Shut up, cancha!" exclaimed Skinny. "Go on, Robby, don't mind him, he's crazy from the heat."

"Listen:

"Millions in sight. Rush sure. Saw Armstrong yesterday"——

"That's the president of the Salt Lake and Gulf line!" Billy cried. "Go on!"

"All plans changed. Meet Atlantic and Pacific at Bagdad"——

"Wow!" yelled Thompson. "Go on!"

"... tapping new fields. Work to be rushed through. Thousand men needed immediately. All ready this end. Letters follow. Get busy.

Signed, Gilding."

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The despatch dropped from the operator's fingers and he grinned foolishly. A moment the three of them stared into one another's eyes. It was Billy who broke the silence, and he broke it with a yell that carried across Main Street, and awoke Fernandez dozing over the *Police Gazette* at the end of the "Monte" bar. Seizing Robinson he dragged him out upon the floor and danced with him up and down the little office, knocking over the bench and water pail in the process, while Skinny looked on, silent but grinning, from his station at the window.

"Why don't you yell, you mullet!" Thompson shouted, but Skinny only shook his head and grinned the broader.

"I'd look pretty yellin,' wouldn't I?" he replied, after a moment, during which Robinson managed to escape from Billy's wild embrace. "One yell'd bust me wide open. Want me to croak right here? They's muss enough now, I should say." He stepped high over the puddle on the sunken floor.

"Aw, buck up, Skinny," urged Thompson. "Croak! Who's goin' to croak—*now*? By golly I always said it would happen sooner or later. Didn't I tell you a year ago you'd see this town come lopin' in at the finish three lengths ahead, one o' these days? Two railroads! D'yeh hear! And me sittin' here tryin' to frame up what I'd write the System as an excuse that'd carry, for pullin' freight! Croak! You bloomin' mullet, go over to José's and buy his bloody place before he finds out. You'll be a millionaire yet. All of us will, by golly! I'm going

to wire to Chi. to-night for three new suits! Skinny, you'll see silk hats in this town yet, and there won't anybody shoot at 'em either! D'ye hear? Silk hats in Bagdad! Gawd! And when we go down to San Luis we'll have to wear dress suits if we want to slice any fruit——"

"I ain't got no dress suit," Robinson glumly complained.

"Git one!" Billy cried. "Why, in six months you'll have so much money you can't count it!"

"Where's it at?"

Skinny chuckled in his throat and coughed.

Billy snatched up his hat.

"Aw, you gimme a pain," he sneered. "You're a pair of shines! Croakers! That's what you are; croakers!"

And with that he fled from the office to carry the news to Bagdad.

"It will be the makin' of the town, though," Robinson declared. "Only they's no use flyin' off the handle about it."

Skinny nodded. "Great!" he agreed. "Great! No mistake about it. Six months from now there'll be something doing here 'sides spittin' at lizards."

"Funny how it come, wasn't it?" Robinson went on. "Right while we was settin' here kickin'."

"It's always that way," Skinny replied. "It's jest as you're goin' down for the third time that somebody shoves you a plank."

"Come so kind o' sudden, though, it knocked my breath out," the other laughed. "I'd half made up my

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mind to blow, too. Looks now, though, as if a feller'd do better to stay. Wait till the news gets 'round."

"It'll be fine for you fellers," Skinny replied. "Fine."

"Us fellers!" exclaimed Robinson. "Ain't you in it jest as much as anybody else?"

Skinny was looking out the window, so Robinson couldn't see the little smile that for a moment flickered in his eyes.

"Mebbe," was the slow reply, "only now't kind o' looks like I might be leavin' 'fore the rush."

"Aw, what's eatin' yeh?" the operator growled, the hidden, deeper, meaning of McGregor's speech apparently lost upon him.

Skinny rose, stretched luxuriously, and coughed. . . .
"S'long."

From the siding he thrust his head in at the window, and said:

"They's another lizard out here; better git Billy and practice a little."

CHAPTER XIII

BAGDAD BOOMS

SADIE was writing by the window of her room that overlooked Main Street when she heard Billy's swift feet on the stairs as he mounted them three steps at a time.

"Sadie! O Sadie!" he called.

"In here," she answered, closing her pad and thrusting her pencil in her pompadour. "Come in, it's all right."

"Sure you're not busy?" he asked as he pushed back the door and entered. It was not his custom thus to visit her in her room, and she wondered what could have brought him now.

"Wasn't doing a thing but scribbling off a line to one of the girls back home," she assured him.

He tossed his hat over on the bed and seating himself in the other chair flecked the dust from his shiny tan shoes with a lavender handkerchief.

"The one you told me about?" he inquired.

She nodded. "Frances."

"Say," he exploded, thrusting the handkerchief into the breast pocket of his coat, "how do you s'pose she'd like to come out here?"

Sadie stared, wide-eyed.

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"Here!" she exclaimed. "What in the world do you mean, Billy?"

He smiled. His heart that moment was reflected in his eyes, but if the girl saw it there she gave no sign.

"Just that," was his vague reply.

Sadie rose and stood before him, her hands on her smooth, curved hips. Her eyes were dancing.

"Now, Billy Thompson, you tell me exactly what you mean," she commanded.

He crooked his arm over his face in mock defense, and Sadie laughed.

"Tell me," she insisted.

"Oh, nothing," he replied with feebly simulated indifference. "Only I wouldn't wonder if there'd be an opening before long."

Sadie sank upon the bed, her hands upon her knees.

"You make me so mad, Billy Thompson," she exclaimed, "I could slap you." But her eyes were caressing.

"Do it!"

Thrusting forward his chin and gazing boldly at her, "Do it," he repeated, "right there"; and he indicated his smooth, boyish cheek.

A delicate wave of color flowed across Sadie's face and she bit her lip.

"Anyway," she declared, with a toss of her head that shook her pompadour, "I think you're just as mean as you can be." But she smiled, and the sunlight flooding the room glinted from the gold in her teeth.

"Well, then, I'll tell you," he said. He hitched his chair nearer the bed, and leaning forward, with his hands

clasped between his knees, went on: "What if a big strike, a corker of a strike, had been made up North?" He hesitated, smiling.

"Yes, yes," she urged, and her eyes leaped.

"And what if all of a sudden, on account of it, the new road—the Salt Lake & Gulf—had changed its plans so as to——"

"O Billy!" she cried, springing up, "it's coming to Bagdad!"

Leaning back then and swelling out his chest, "Uh huh," he confirmed proudly.

"Billy!" She clasped her hands; every fiber of her lithe young body quivered. "That'll mean——"

"Mean!" he cried, on his feet and seizing her hand quite as if some of her own enthusiasm that moment had been given him to share. "It'll mean 'most anything. It'll mean this town'll take a boom. The rush'll go in from here. Look at what Cripple was, and Victor, and Goldfield and Tonopah! It'll mean Bagdad'll beat all those shine towns to a custard with frostin' on! It'll boom, Sadie; boom with a big B! I wouldn't even be surprised if the System added on another wing! It'll be great only——"

"Only what," she urged.

"Only we'll have to quit ornamentin' the scenery and turn in and do some real work. And we'll need more help. Now do you see what I was drivin' at 'bout the girl back in K. C.?"

"Won't it be great!" she cried.

"The work?" he interrupted.

Bagdad Booms

She flung an impatient gesture. "Fudge on the work!" she exclaimed. "I mean Fan. Having her here, and all that! I'm going to write her to-day, in this letter. She'll be tickled to death!"

"Would she come?" Billy seemed to doubt.

"Come!" cried Sadie. "Watch her!"

"I wouldn't get her all fussed up," he cautioned. "Maybe you'd better wait a little."

All the light went out of her face.

"But it's going to happen, Billy, ain't it; just like you said?" she pleaded.

"It is unless somebody's a damn—I mean an awful liar," he reassured her.

Then the light flared up in her eyes again, and with a little shudder of delight she declared:

"O Billy! I could just hug you!"

Billy started, then, turning, gazed out the window. From away up the road came the tinkle of a mule bell.

"Well," he said slowly, "I'm waiting."

"What for?" she blankly inquired.

"For you to hug me."

She took a step toward him and he held his breath. But she came no nearer. Studying the back of his head an instant, she said: "No, I'm not going to either—yet. Maybe it won't happen after all."

His laugh as he turned was somewhat forced and hollow.

"All right," he said as he took up his hat and smoothed the lavender band. "You'll see. Go on; write her then, if you want—to-day."

Sadie

After he had gone she stood for a minute at the window. The tinkle of the mule bell was closer now, distinct and clear. In a little surge of memory she recalled how she had stood here at the window, on her first afternoon in Bagdad, just as she was standing now, and heard this same bell across the glaring, mote-shot distance. The great lumbering outfit emerged from its dust cloud, and she saw the driver, sitting loosely at ease, on the near wheeler. A little smile curved her lips and for a moment she closed her eyes. When she opened them the outfit had passed. A second great cloud of dust down the road showed where it was—somewhere within the cloud.

"I wonder"—She spoke the words aloud—"I wonder if she'd ever grow to love it out here, the way I have."

.

And so Bagdad heard the news.

José Fernandez so far forgot himself, even, as to "set 'em up" to such of his friends as entered the "Monte" that afternoon, Billy among them.

"It's my luck," the latter declared as José pushed the champagne bottle toward him across the bar, and he poured from it into the thick, tall lemonade glass. "Just when I'm getting ready to blow the whole show, somebody tilts the bucket and 'color' shows in the wash. Here's to you, José, and the town."

"Dreenk hearta," replied the Mexican. "Beesness she peek up mebbe, eh?"

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"Pick up!" exclaimed Billy. "You'll have to put in more slot-machines and get a new wheel."

Fernandez's little eyes became mere glittering points, and he shook his bristly head. "Mebbe meechine, no w'eel, zat ol' w'eel good 'nough." Billy wiped his mouth to hide the smile. "Zat leetla Skinny wonder wi' zat w'eel," he declared—"zat w'eel."

"Why don't you raise his wages then?" Billy asked. Obviously such a course had never occurred to the "Monte's" shrewd proprietor. With an exclamation he flung down his bar cloth and clapped his hands, hands that were very like a woman's. "B' Gar I do eet!" he declared. "I do eet Sat'd'y night, b' Gar! Billy Tho'son zat good idee. I do eet. Much 'blige. Feenish ze bottle on zat!"

And Billy did, with a toast to Skinny in which Fernandez joined, and all the afternoon the Mexican's spirits remained at summer heat. None knew better than he what the new road and the new strike would mean to Bagdad—and to himself. And so, in the ecstasy that was his, he called to Sadie as she passed the "Monte" shortly after Billy's departure, on her way to Skinny's tent.

"You heer news 'bout railroad, Mees Mor'son? Eh, yes? You come have dreenk, too!"

Laughing, she refused.

Fernandez's little eyes opened to their greatest width. "B' Gar!" he cried, grasping her wrist, "I mos' forgeet. 'Member one day long time 'go, you say you spin zat w'eel? By Gar, w'en you comin' do eet?"

"Oh, I've not forgotten, Mr. Fernandez," she assured him. "I'm coming one of these days——"

"No, no," he interrupted hastily. "Not day, not day. Come night. Beeg crowd! Grea' beeg crowd!" And he waved his short arms to indicate the vast, tireless sand wheel of which, to him, the "Monte" was the hub.

Sadie laughed. "You'll see," she flung back over her shoulder. "I'll come when you least expect me."

And until she disappeared around the corner of the Yellow Dog the Mexican stood in the doorway of his empty place gazing at her.

"By Gar," he muttered as he turned back into the bar, "zat Mees Mor'son she be fine girl." For Fernandez was not the one to forget how Sadie had come to him when most a woman's hand was needed in his stricken house. And was not little José, whose tiny life she had saved, at this very moment kicking up his heels in glee on the floor of the 'dobe—over there? Fernandez shook his head and smiled, and his little, beady eyes grew moist, for he was not the sort that forgets.

Standing in the middle of the low-ceiled, smoke-grimed room, he looked about him. Displeasure with what he beheld was written large upon his swarthy face.

On the stained and whittled table near the door lay a dog-eared copy of the *Police Gazette*. Ranged back against the wall across from the sodden, time-worn bar—with its bent footrail, under which squatted half a dozen sand-filled, wooden cuspidors—stood a battery of tall, slim slot-machines, their glaring, varicolored disks twinkling in the sunlight which managed to sift through

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the dust-frosted windows. They were all of the quarter, half-dollar, and dollar variety, for the nickel machine of Eastern civilization was unknown in Bagdad. At the back of the room, beneath a huge oil lamp, pendant from the smoke-black ceiling by triple chains, was the faro layout, dull green in the shadow now. The case frame hung on a hook above, and behind, slightly higher than the dealer's seat, was the lookout's chair. Near the door, where the light was strongest, was the roulette wheel of rosewood, birdseye maple and ash, the little ivory ball lying in a cup at the bottom. Against the wall, all the way round the room, were numerous curled and crinkled lithographs, for the greater part of half-draped female figures, advertising all the brands of liquor dispensed at the bar, but more that were not. Across from the slot machines hung, at an angle, a long, wide mirror, on which, weeks before, a vagrant artist had painted in different colored soaps, by way of payment for a drunk vouchsafed him, the life-size figure of an unclad woman, reposing rigidly upon a bank of vivid moss. The mirror, later, had been covered with blue mosquito netting, pulled to stiff rosettes at the corners. Through this screen the lines of the uncomfortable lady on the glass lost something of their harshness. The floor beneath Fernandez's feet, laid flat on the sand, was splintered in places, and uneven.

The eyes of the Mexican perceived every detail of the room, and his opinion, uttered aloud at last, was:

"Dees dump gotta be feexed up. She look damn bad!"

Later he took Skinny into his confidence and between them they planned a new scheme of decoration which comprised whitewashing the walls and ceiling, changing the netting over the mirror to pink, and writing to Milwaukee and Louisville for newer placards, the latter of which Skinny forthwith did, while upon Mrs. Fernandez devolved the duty of providing the mosquito bar of the desired shade.

"But there's no telling," suggested Skinny, as he folded the letter, "that it's going to happen like we think it is. Nobody's heard a word to confirm that telegram Robinson caught. Mebbe its foolishness to go to so much trouble after all."

This had not occurred to José, and for a moment he was startled, but he had not ordered the whitewashing as yet, and he rejoiced.

However, confirmation was not slow in coming. It was brought on Friday by Al Tunnison, the gaunt, blue-eyed proprietor of the Palace Hotel, at Cottonwood. He had received the news direct. There could be no error, for at that moment the private car of the vice-president of the S. L. & G., lay on the siding directly in front of the Palace.

"Yessir," he declared to Billy, "it's all true. And that's why I come over—t' talk to you 'bout it, I mean. It's Allie's idee, though; don't know's I'd ever figgered it out." And he bit a half moon from the pound plug of Battle-Axe that projected from the hip pocket of his corduroys. They were seated in the shade of the sprawling water tank on the high pile of ties behind. Tunnison

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had hinted that the purpose of his visit was important, and that he did not wish it known, so Billy had taken him there. He had come over on No. 4, and must leave, he announced, on No. 5.

His chew well moistened, modeled, and stowed in his cheek, he continued:

"Billy, it's like this here. Bagdad's shore goin' t' boom. I've bin out here on the aide o' Hades long 'nough t' know what a real gold strike an' two railroads means to a town. It means money." He spat sparsely and looking up inquired: "What they payin' you out here, Billy?"

Thompson laughed. "It don't make my pants baggy to carry it," he replied, then told him.

A moment Tunnison pondered, expectorating at a bush of greaseweed, twenty feet away.

"'Taint what you'd call a princely income, is it?" he observed.

The other was compelled to agree that it was not.

"But there ain't much to do, you know, Al," he added defensively.

Tunnison nodded. "Could do a little more'f yeh hed to, couldn't yeh?" he inquired blandly. "Wouldn't be ag'in' gittin' better money if yeh didn't hev t' over-work yerself, would yeh?"

Billy laughed and wondered. "I don't believe I'd bust a blood vessel fightin' against it, Al," he replied.

"Thought not," Tunnison declared, and spat again at the bush of greaseweed. "Well, I'll tell you what it's all about. Ever sence we heard the news Allie'n me's

been figgerin'! Night 'fore las' she ups an' says, 'Al,' she says, 'why'n hell don't you git up there t' Bagdad a-kitin',' she says, 'an' git in on the groun' floor?' 'How d'yeh mean?' I says. 'Hotel,' says she; an' by golly I laid awake half th' night figgerin' it out. Then the next mornin' at breakfas' she come at me ag'in. 'I got it, Al,' she says, all of a sudden—you know how she is? 'Well, what is it?' I says. 'Make Billy'—only she called you 'Mister'—'Make Mr. Thompson manager,' says she; and by golly, Billy, it was jest what hed bin pesterin' me—who'd run her if I sh'u'd open her up. An' Allie'd hit the nail square on the head jest like she was buildin' a sidewalk!" Shifting his chew he searched Thompson's face. "Well, wha' d'yeh say?" he asked.

The smile had fled from Billy's eyes and he was studying the toes of his russet shoes.

"Al," he answered slowly, "I'm much obliged; to you and Allie both, only——"

"'Fraid the Carter folks won't let you off?" Tunnison growled. "Got a contrac', or somethin'?"

Billy shook his head. "It ain't that, Al; I was just thinking, that's all." He looked up, smiling wistfully. "You see, I'd almost decided to leave Bagdad. No, it ain't the System."

"What's eatin' yeh, then?" snapped Tunnison, testily.

Billy laughed again. "Go on," he said, "tell me all about it."

"Ain't I jest tol' yeh?" complained the other. "Say, look here. Ain't I run th' Palace, over't Cottonwood

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fer goin' on ten years? An' ain't I made it pay? I know it ain't been no gold mine, really, but by golly it's a dum sight better'n a lot o' gold mines you'n I've heard tell of. Well, if a hotel can be made t' pay in Cottonwood caterin' to a lot o' sheeps, can't one be made t' pay a heap sight more in a town like what Bagdad's goin' t' be?"

"Then you mean you'd operate both places?" Billy put in.

"Shore I w'u'd," Tunnison exclaimed. "That's t' say, *I'd* stay on over't Cottonwood an' *you'd* run th' Palace—better call it that, hedn't we?—here'n Bagdad. 'Course I'll put up all the money."

"Now you're talking, Al," Billy cried.

A look of deep disgust swept over the lined and brown-tanned countenance of the man beside him. "Good Lord, that wasn't what was eatin' yeh, was it?" he exploded. "Well, I'll be durned! Shore I'll put up th' money; all of it. Ain't I jest said th' Palace'd been better'n a lot of gold mines? And what's more, I'll pay you two hundred a month t' run it; and if that ain't enough I'll fix up a percentage."

For a space Billy did not answer, then, reaching out his hand, he declared: "Al, you're the goods. You're all there. You're the kind of a friend, old man, a feller likes to have and don't—very often. I'll take you——"

"Good!" Tunnison slapped his leg, but Billy lifted his hand.

"—on one condition," he added.

"What is it?" the other growled.

"I can't tell you to-day, Al," was the reply. "But I'll find out and wire you in the morning. Will that do?"

Tunnison pursed his thin, dry lips.

"Looks like it 'u'd hev t'," was the disgruntled retort.

"Shake, then!"

And across the ties their hands met.

"But, Al," Billy resumed after a moment, "it'll pay a heap better here than the Palace in Cottonwood; why don't you sell out clean down there, and run the new house yourself?"

For a long time Tunnison stared blankly, ruminatively, at the greaseweed bush. "It's on account o' Allie," he replied at last, and in his voice there was a new note; one, perhaps, of paternal tenderness.

Billy Thompson nodded. "I see," he said, but he didn't, quite, for all that.

"Over here," Tunnison ran on dreamily, "they all know what—what Allie was, and—and mebbe they wouldn't quite treat her like—like—they oughter. Yeh see, Billy—" he turned and in his clear, clean, steel-blue eyes Billy Thompson saw burning the fires of life—"me'n Allie's got it framed up—they don't anybody know 'bout it, yet—but we're goin' t' be married—Billy—me'n Allie——"

He got no further. Impulsively Thompson had seized his great, hard hand, a second time.

"Al, I'm mighty glad; I can't tell you how glad!"

"Seemed t' be 'bout the wisest thing t' do," Tunnison added.

"Do you mind if I let Sadie know, Al?" Billy asked.

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"Yeh mean Miss Morrison? Not if you wanta; I got an idee Allie'd be kind o' glad fer her t' know."

But Allie could not have been more glad for that than Sadie was to hear. After supper she came out where Thompson was sitting in front of the eating house. He told her then and when he had done so there were tears in her eyes and her voice trembled the least bit as she said:

"Billy, that's a lot better, even, than the other news."

She looked very fresh and desirable in her white waist and skirt, and the heart of Billy Thompson quickened as he contemplated her.

"Al made me a proposition to manage the hotel he's going to put up here in Bagdad," he announced, blankly, after a moment.

"Billy!" Sadie exclaimed, then caught herself and inquired with seeming indifference, "Would you leave the System, then?"

"I'd have to," he told her. "I said to Al there was a condition, and promised him I'd let him know in the morning."

"It would be a lot better than this, wouldn't it?" she asked quietly.

"A lot." He was rolling a cigarette.

"Then of course you'll take it, won't you?" She was conscious of the different note in her voice and looked away.

He bent the end of his cigarette and felt for a match.

"It's up to you, Sadie," was his, to her, enigmatic answer.

She caught her breath and her hand went to her lips. They were quite alone, and now, she told herself, it was his purpose to give voice to what long since she had seen in his eyes.

"I—I don't know what you mean, Billy," she said hesitatingly.

"I wouldn't take it unless you'd go, too."

She bit her lip. There was nothing she could say that would prevent—now.

"What—what to do, Billy?"

He struck the match. In its yellow flare he saw her face, clear in the purple shadow frame surrounding it. He leaned toward her, reached out to take her hand—the match, forgotten, burned to his fingers. With a smothered exclamation he sat up and flung it out upon the track.

"To be housekeeper, with three dollars more a week than you're getting here," he blurted impatiently.

Her eyes danced and she drew a deep breath of relief.

He felt her hand light upon his arm.

"Do you want me to, Billy?"

"Yes."

"All right."

He unhooked his heels from the rung of the chair. "I'll wire Al in the morning," he said. It was as if he were looking into her face still, as it had been revealed to him in the yellow flare. He was keenly conscious that never before had he come so near to telling her all that lay deep within his heart of hearts.

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"Billy"—Her voice sounded close to his ear, so close that were he to turn his head his lips would brush hers.

"What is it?" He held rigid.

"Light another match and let me see if you burned your finger."

CHAPTER XIV

SKINNY TELLS A STORY

WITHIN a fortnight work on the Palace was well under way. Wisely, Tunnison had left the selection of site and all superintendence to Thompson. The latter was on the ground, and, as the former said, he had troubles of his own, down the line. The location according to Billy—who made the assertion with a twinkle in his eye—was “the best in the city, right in the heart of the business district on Main Street.” That more genius than even he possessed would have been required to select a site that was *not* in the “business district” and on Main Street, provided it was the desire to have the hotel in Bagdad at all, was not deemed worth mentioning.

In any event the Palace would, as was his boast, be an ornament to the town. The façade was to be of galvanized iron, and across the front in relief letters, two feet high, it would sport the name, “The Palace,” a specimen of hostelry nomenclature without which, it may be noted in passing, no Southwestern town can be said to be complete. At first Billy had suggested “The Tunnison,” as more snappy and up-to-date, but Al’s modest nature shrank from such personal exploitation. “Besides,” he added, “they can’t nobody tell but what

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mebbe I might have t' change m' name, an' if I should it'd mean we'd have t' git a new front."

The effect from the railway would be that of a solid granite structure, three stories in height, albeit the third story was indicated solely by the "bluff front." From the rear, whence no one save an occasional sheepman or wandering Mexican approached, the true nature of the deception was at once apparent. Furthermore, the imagination of the architect, a carpenter from Cottonwood, had not thus far been able to conceive three real stories. Within the four wood walls the arrangement was to be that of the eating house, that is to say the partitions were to rise only three-quarters the distance to the ceiling.

"It's the simplest system of ventilation ever discovered," Billy explained to Skinny one afternoon.

"Hadn't ought to be much trouble 'bout gettin' air whatever way you do it," Skinny replied, "there ain't much of anything else out here *to* get."

"And from the front," Billy went on soberly, "she'll be a regular skyscraper."

"Careful you don't get her top-heavy," was the warning reply.

From where they sat, in Skinny's tent, the work of construction could be watched with comfort, and since the beginning Billy had spent more time with the little gambler than ever before.

"But I'm glad she's going up, Billy," the latter declared, "and right where she is, too. It's the most excitin' thing that's happened in Bagdad since the night

Sadie held up Red Lawton—and I can see it all sittin' here, just by pinnin' that flap back."

Billy suggested that it might be feasible to appoint Skinny supervising architect, whereat the latter laughed and replied:

"That's right. Anything I can do to earn a livin' without movin's the thing for me. 'Sides nobody knows how much graft there may be in that marble work. Bought the stuff for the inside yet, Billy?"

"Al's gettin' it in Phoenix," was the reply. "Iron beds and washstands and white chairs and the bar stuff. I've written to Detroit about the slot machines and a concern in Chicago—somewhere on Lake Street—'s fixin' up the wheel and the layouts."

"Going t' gimme a job, Billy? I'm a humdinger when it comes to copping the coin for the house on the wheel."

Thompson turned, staring. "By golly, Skinny," he exclaimed, slapping his leg, "I never thought of it. 'Course I will. Sure!"

McGregor smiled mistily and shook his head. "'Fraid José wouldn't know what to do," he replied. "Mebbe he's had an idea I was going t' leave, for he tilted my wages couple o' weeks ago."

Thompson remembered, then, and looked away through the A of the tent entrance.

"We'll see later," he said.

"Have you resigned from the System, yet?" Skinny inquired.

Thompson shook his head. "Not yet," he replied.

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"Going to wait till 'bout two weeks 'fore we open. I've written 'em about the Palace, though. Wouldn't wonder if they surmised. I advised 'em to close the eating house, but they won't, not with two railroads here. Probably shift somebody from somewhere else. I'm going to take Charley later if he'll come, and Al's got a couple of greaser girls down t' Cottonwood he's going to send over till Sadie's pal can blow from Kansas City. She said there's one there that'd like to come out and I told her to write her and see. She says she's a peach."

"Probably be married 'fore she's been here fifteen minutes," Skinny prophesied.

"That's the trouble," Billy agreed. He looked down and slapped his tan puttees with the quirt he carried. "Still, that's what we said about Sadie," he added.

"There ain't many like Sadie," Skinny observed.

Billy looked up then and his eyes met McGregor's squarely.

"There ain't *any* like her," he corrected.

Thereupon between them ensued a period of silence. It was as if thought of Sadie and the mention of her name had cast a spell from which neither desired to escape. It was Skinny who broke the silence at last.

"When do you s'pose you'll lay the cornerstone?" he inquired, a twinkle coming back into his sunken eyes.

Billy sat up. "Mebbe three weeks," he replied. "Time the railroad gets near enough to make it interesting, and the news of the strike sifts through."

"Goin' to have a dedication?" Skinny asked. He

chuckled and coughed, then laughed aloud. "I was just thinkin'," he explained apologetically.

"'Bout what?"

"'Bout the time they dedicated St. Aloysius Mission, back in Cleveland. Didn't I ever tell you 'bout that?" He grinned broadly, and the infection of his grin spread to Thompson's countenance.

Billy shook his head and edged the box on which he was sitting nearer Skinny's steamer chair. "What about it?" he urged.

"Gimme a cigarette and I'll tell you."

The "makin's" were produced from the hip pocket of Thompson's khaki breeches. Slowly—aggravatingly slowly—Skinny performed the ceremony of rolling the flake in the bit of brown paper. The cigarette fairly alight at last he shifted his position slightly, blew a ring, thrust a long, slim forefinger through it, and said:

"It was what Jerry Rowley'd call a suspicious occasion—him bein' some loose with English. Father Foley was t' blame, b' rights. If he hadn't welted Mickey over the side o' the head with a shavin' strap just because Mickey'd let a dornick fly through the pantry window of the parish house b' mistake, prob'ly it wouldn't ever have happened. Mickey lived with his aunt. His mother'd been a Catholic 'fore she died and his old man was, too. But he was away on the section 'most all the time, and Mickey's foot sorter slipped. His aunt didn't care, or if she did she couldn't say anything, for her foot'd slipped, too, when she got a divorce from Mickey's mother's brother. He didn't mean to heave the dornick, though.

Skinny Tells a Story

Said afterwards he was throwin' at a squirrel, but he was in Father Foley's back yard and it looked bad. Father Foley came flyin' 'round the corner of the house just as the glass smashed in the pantry. He'd been shavin' and one side of his face was all lather. He didn't have his collar on, or his coat, and his suspenders were hangin' down. I guess he was in his stockin' feet, too, for it was early one Saturday mornin'. Mickey was so s'prised he didn't even try to get away; just stood there, laffin'. Father Foley forgot half his face was all lather, and when he brushed his hand over it he got a mouthful. He began sputterin' like a soda fountain, and Mickey laffed some more. Father Foley forgot all about the window. He was mad clean through. He made one le'p, spittin' lather like he had hydrophobia, and swung the razor strop he was carryin' and let Mickey have it. Caught him right 'longside the head, hook 'n' all. He quit laffin' then and let out a yell they heard clear up to No. 6 engine house, and made for the fence. It was a tight board one, and Mickey said afterwards he didn't even touch it goin' over. I guess he lied, though, for it was all of six feet high. Safe on the other side he knelt down and looked through a knot hole. Father Foley was standin' in the middle of the yard, holdin' up his pants with one hand, and diggin' the lather out of his mouth and eyes with the other. Mickey always said he was swearin' under his breath, but I don't believe *that*. By and by he went back in, and Mickey he just sat right down there by that knot hole and commenced to figure. You see he didn't have anything to worry about.

He'd quit wearin' his scapular three or four weeks before, and Father Foley was just like anybody else as far as he was concerned. His foot had slipped that bad.

"He crossed his heart he'd get even, and when they dedicated St. Aloysius Mission he had the chance he'd been waitin' for.

"He'n Ernie did it——"

"Who was Ernie—his brother?" Billy inquired, grinning.

Skinny shook his head, and flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"Chicken," he explained tersely.

"A chicken!" cried Thompson blankly.

Skinny nodded. "Uh huh. I d'know where he got the name, but that's what he always called him—Ernie. And a gamer bantam never lived. He had blood in his little button eyes all the time, and a pair of spurs that looked like steer's horns, growin' out of his ankles. Mickey pitted him lots of times, and he had a record as a killer that'd make Geronimo's look like a Sunday-school lesson in kindness. Those were the days when all the kids had fightin' chickens, or pigeons, or white mice; you remember?"

Billy laughed. "I had rabbits," he said. "Go on."

"Well, for two days before the dedication, Mickey starved Ernie. He could have eat shoe pegs, he was so hungry. The ceremony was set for two o'clock and the Bishop was to be there.

"It was a nice, warm day in June—'long about the last, if I remember right. It took Mickey 'bout an hour

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to get Ernie ready. He'd figured it all out, you see. He tied the end of a ball of string to one of Ernie's legs and unwound about a hundred feet of it. Then he put Ernie under his coat, chokin' him so's he couldn't crow, and sneaked up behind the Mission. The workmen had left a cellar window open and Mickey crawled through. He wasn't in there more'n two minutes, but when he came out he didn't have Ernie, only the string. He paid off the hundred feet of it clear over to the fence and poked the end with a stick through a gimlet hole he'd bored. Then he crawled over the fence, and tied the string to a piece of coal so's it couldn't slip through and went 'round in front where the folks were commencing to go in. By ten minutes past two the place was filled full. All the windows were open, and sittin' behind the fence, with his eye to the gimlet hole and the string in his hand, Mickey could hear everything that went on inside just as plain as though he was among those present."

A spasm of coughing seized the story teller, and when it had passed he lay back, inert and pale, in the steamer chair, with his eyes closed.

Thompson leaned over him. "Is there anything I can get you, Skinny?" he asked.

The little fellow's head moved weakly from side to side.

"One-of-those-is-going-to-get-me-sometime," he whispered raspingly. Then he opened his eyes and looked up into Billy's, smiling. "Sit down," he said, "the finish is the best part of it."

Once his breath caught in his throat. That he was in pain was indicated by the way his thin fingers curled into the palms of his transparent hands.

"There was a little organ," he went on in a half-whisper, "and Margaret Delaney played it. Mebbe you don't know it, Billy, but it's a fact that a chicken never crows in the dark unless something happens to worry it. But Mickey knew that, you can bet your life. Margaret had just finished the first piece when Mickey gave the string a little, quick jerk. It worked. Ernie cut loose. He let out a crow that surprised even Mickey. Folks that were inside said everybody jumped like they'd touched a live wire. The Bishop gave Father Foley a look, they said, that made his face turn as red as a Hamburg steak. All was still for a while and then Father Foley got up. Mickey give the string another jerk and Ernie handed out some more. The folks jumped again. You see, they'd thought the first time was an accident and weren't lookin' for an encore. Father Foley got so rattled the Bishop called him down right there in front of everybody. He was boilin' inside that hard if you'd 'a' stuck a pin in him he'd 'a' hissed like a leaky radiator. Then for a few minutes Mickey didn't pull the string. Everything got quiet again and the folks settled themselves comfortable to hear the Bishop. He was sailin' along in great shape, only touchin' the high places, when Mickey sent another telegram to Ernie. Ernie took it right hot off the wire and delivered the goods again, two or three times with one breath. His Reverence collapsed like a bicycle tire when it hits a tack—and set

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down. After that there was no holding the congregation, everybody was grinning and winking at one another, and the exercises come to an end 'bout an hour before they'd ought to. The people went away chucklin', the Bishop didn't speak to Father Foley, and then almost before he knew what had happened, Father Foley was all alone in the new Mission. Seems two or three men had taken a look around, but they hadn't even seen Mickey's string, let alone locate Ernie. But Father Foley made up his mind he was goin' to find that chicken if it lost him the parish. Mickey heard him in the little entry where the cellar door was, and sneaked up to the window. Layin' flat on his stomach and peekin', Mickey saw him come down the cellar stairs, stoopin' so's not to hit the ceiling. Everything was as still as a cemetery and pretty dark. Mickey waited till his Reverence was right under a low beam, then pulled the string for the last time. I guess Ernie thought he'd let out one that would be remembered, for Mickey said it come so quick and loud it scared him even. Father Foley jumped straight up and his bald head banged the beam that hard Mickey said it sounded like hittin' an ash barrel with a ball bat. Mickey had jerked so sudden he'd broke the string, and before Father Foley come to he'd drawn it out through the window. But it located Ernie. With blood in his eye, and his lips stretched back over his teeth like he was tryin' to lift a barrel of salt on a bet, he sneaked across the cellar and threw open the furnace door. Ernie did the rest. That was just what he wanted, only Father Foley didn't know it. With a rattle like you've heard 'em give in the pits

down't San Luis, Ernie flew out in his Reverence's face, and let him have both spurs before he could dodge. Whether it was a chicken or a banshee he didn't wait to find out, and he only belted his head twice gettin' up those stairs. As for Ernie, when his little bloody eyes saw the light of the open cellar window he flew for it, and Mickey grabbed him and choked him before he could relieve himself of another crow. He was over the Mission fence in less time than it takes to tell it, and that night for supper Ernie had crackers and milk, and all the wheat he could eat, and a big plate of chopped meat. Mickey went to church the next Sunday. Father Foley had a long strip of court-plaster on each cheek, and a couple of domes on his bald head as big and shiny as snow apples."

Skinny flipped the end of his cigarette out upon the sand.

"I was just thinkin'," he added, "if you could pull off a dedication like that it might make a hit."

Billy was laughing too hard to reply at once, but when finally he got his breath, he exclaimed:

"Skinny, you ought to be shot for keeping that story till now, without telling it."

McGregor grinned. "Ernie had a bum finish, though," he concluded. "He seemed to realize what he'd done and got so chesty he thought he could stop a street car just by swellin' up in the middle of the track and crowing at it. But the motorman gave her six points and Ernie's crow wasn't more'n half let when his light went out. Mickey never found any of him but a tail

Skinny Tells a Story

feather, and his aunt wore that in her hat for a long time——”

Another roar of laughter burst from Thompson, and when he had sufficiently recovered to make speech possible he exclaimed:

“Skinny, you’re the biggest liar in the Territory!”

McGregor’s little pinched face assumed a hurt look.

“Honest, Billy,” he declared solemnly, “if you don’t believe me you can write Mickey yourself.”

Then another spasm of coughing seized him, causing all the laughter light to flee from Billy’s eyes as he looked away, with a little shiver.

“Yes, sir,” Skinny gasped with what appeared to Billy to be his last breath, “it won’t be long now ’fore everybody in Bagdad’ll be on the top of the heap—most everybody, I mean,” he qualified as if on second thought. “First thing he knows, Jerry Rowley’ll have to put in a new line of pick-handles and overalls. Say,” he exclaimed, sitting up, “ain’t it kind o’ funny he don’t blow in?”

And a week later Jerry did.

CHAPTER XV

JERRY ROWLEY PROPOSES

ON his return Rowley had a great deal to do, much to tell, but more to insinuate. Where Rowley was there was romance, for if externally it did not exist, he produced it from his own inner consciousness. Something of the spirit of a past-and-gone Munchausen had been transferred to him to the end that, if not to those who had acquaintance with him, he was unto himself, at least, a hero.

For several nights after his return he held forth grandly in the Bon Marché, and the Western stories of the New England novelists based on their car-window experiences of the wide and open places are less lurid than the tales he told, in every one of which Rowley the Great was cast to play the hero's part.

And yet, familiar as his listeners were with all his methods of romance, his safety lay in their equal familiarity with the fiery horrors of that blighted land the lure of gold had led him through. Indeed, there was but little fabrication required on Rowley's part for him to produce the desired effect upon his hearers, sun-tanned men in corduroy and jeans who had fought for life as he professed to have fought, beneath a sun that, swinging low from a blinding sky, like an incandescent ball of brass, seared

Jerry Rowley Proposes

and blighted, as a furnace fire, all living things that challenged it.

For three days he had been alone in the Valley. His one pack animal had fallen in its tracks, and humanely he had sent a bullet through its brain. His horse had gone lame, later, and it, too, paid the forfeit demanded by the sun. The water hole, upon which he had depended, was dry, and he stood face to face with Death, the destroyer of him whose mummified body lay at his feet along the rim of stones where water once had been. His tongue swollen, black, and pressed between his teeth, he had pushed on, on, ever on, to the end of the rainbow where lay the pot of gold. One by one he had flung away the articles of his pack until at last, half crazed and valiantly fighting the weird animals and unholy figures that danced before him on the sun-shot air, he had been succored by a Panimint Indian.

Recovering, he and the Indian had fared forth together. It would appear that Fate, moved by the valor he had shown, held out to him a token of reward. Off the beaten trail he found a ledge of fabulous richness.

At this point in his story he rose from the case of "air-tights" on which he had been sitting, and amid a silence that carried compliment, he passed around the counter and from beneath drew forth a sack. Billy Thompson and the rest crowded up to the counter. Rowley fumbled the thong that puckered the wide mouth of the specimen bag. Some one offered to help him, another thrust forward a knife. But the thick fingers at last succeeded in untying the many knots, and seizing the

sack by its ears, Rowley emptied the contents out upon the counter.

"Madre D'Or!" gasped José Fernandez, his little pig eyes fairly bulging from his head.

Such ore, heavy with the gold it carried, had never before been seen in Bagdad. Billy Thompson's fingers trembled as he lifted a piece for closer inspection. At his shoulder he heard Sansome breathing hard. In the eyes of every man at the counter burned the fires of gold lust, fires like none other that flares in human eyes. And in front of them stood Rowley, the man who had entered the joust with Death, and winning had brought away the golden cup. One hand on his hip, the other pulling at his drooping, bleached mustache, he smiled beneath his shaggy, beetling brows. To one who knew—who realized what of deep significance these ragged chunks of glittering rock possessed—there was something of the ancient knight about the uncouth, proud figure of the man who watched the others from behind the counter.

"How much is there of it?" Robinson hoarsely asked at last.

Rowley shrugged his shoulders and spread out his brown and heat-cracked hands.

"A whole ledge of it," he replied.

"Madre D'Or!" reverently muttered Fernandez again, while a low whistle dripped from the lips of Billy Thompson.

"Going to pull freight out o' here, now, ain't you, Jerry?" he inquired.

Rowley expanded his chest until his blue shirt gaped

Jerry Rowley Proposes

between the buttons, revealing three ellipses of his hairy breast.

"I ain't quite decided," he replied. "With a strike like this, and the railroad comin' hell bent, Bagdad looks pritty good t' me."

"Does the new line go anywhere near it?" Sansome asked, pointing to the ore, glittering under the huge oil lamp dependent from the low-beamed ceiling.

"Two miles—easy going," was the terse reply.

They looked at one another

"Just like finding it under the lunch counter over't the eating house," Billy declared.

Rowley grinned.

One by one he gathered up the pieces and dropped them into the sack.

"Filed your claim, Jerry?" Robinson inquired.

"Betcher life; that's why I didn't get here sooner. She's as tight and as safe as the diamond hitch. And I let a young feller on one of the newspapers have the whole story," he added. "If that don't start things going, I don't know Jerry Rowley. I'm lookin' for returns and the assay report any day. They'll be a rush"—he wagged his head—"they'll be a rush for shore."

"What kind o' luck did Curly Watrous have?" asked Billy.

Rowley tied five knots and pulled them tight.

"Him and me separated at Dry Springs," he replied. "He hooked up with some feller from back East that he run 'cross. He was for cuttin' through to the west an' I said east. They were headin' fer Goldfield

when I left 'em. He'll git somethin'—Curly—if he don't git into trouble. Talk about a cane-mule doin' what he wants t', in spite o' all hell, why, Curly Watrous has got every mule in that borax outfit over there skun to death!"

The little group broke up, each man departing in silence wondering futilely why some of this great luck had not fallen to his share. Billy Thompson was the last to leave the store.

Rowley was kneeling in front of the little cast-iron safe at the end of the counter, fumbling the combination disk.

"I congratulate you, Jerry," Billy said, "only I wish I'd had the luck and made the strike myself. What you goin' to call the mine? Got a good name for it?"

"Couldn't have a better one," was the reply.

"What is it?"

Stowing away the sack of specimens Rowley shut the safe door and spun the disk. Rising and leaning back against the counter so that he faced Billy under the lamp:

"I call it 'The Sadie,'" he said, "after Mis' Mor'son."

On the instant Billy Thompson was startled, then he was almost impelled to laugh, but the laughter died at its birth in his eyes. In its place there flickered a light of infinite tenderness. He looked down at the floor, then up again, and said:

"Well, Jerry, all I can say is, if it pans out like Sadie has, you'll be the richest man in the world."

"I guess that's right, Billy," was the softly spoken reply.

Jerry Rowley Proposes

"Good-night." And Billy Thompson, turning on his heel, left the store.

On his way back to the eating house he thought of but two things—Sadie and gold. Possessing either it seemed to him that the other might be easily secured, but neither was his, nor, he told himself, ever would be, hope though he might. Until late into the night he sat under the stars in front of the eating house, reviewing his life, going over again all the ambitions that had been his when first the desert called him. How far they were beyond the realization of the years that followed only he could know. And yet, after all, he tried to reassure himself, something might come to him. There was the Palace. To be sure it would not prove a gold mine, yet, in the end, are there not things even more to be desired than a gold mine?

Sadie.

There was Sadie. For a year—more—it had been Sadie. Sadie. Sadie—or a gold mine? Sadie, vastly more, he told himself—and yet as far away. At least he would not tell her the name that Jerry had given his mine. To be sure he had not been pledged to silence, but after all it was for Jerry himself to tell her; it was his right. Before his going away, Billy had seen the direction of Jerry's hopes. And he felt, as certain as if he had been told, that the reason for that going away was to find gold that he might lay at Sadie's feet. Gold and a girl! It was a game in which gold always seemed to hold the better cards. Would it win this time, too? Billy Thompson asked the stars, or would its long run

of luck change? He shook his head and a sad little smile trembled about his lips.

"What's the use?" he muttered, rising.

He carried in the chair, and locked the door. Turning out the light over the lunch counter, he took off his shoes and in his polka-dot stocking feet, noiselessly mounted the narrow stairs, that he might not awaken Sadie.

During the week that followed Sadie saw Rowley several times, but only for an instant, on the street or in the store, where a prolonged conversation was impossible. On none of these occasions did he mention the pony, and Sadie was at a loss to know what her attitude properly should be in the circumstances.

On Saturday afternoon she set out, as was her custom, for a ride to the northern mesa, and never once looking back, as the whitewash of Bagdad grew misty in the southern dust, she was quite unconscious that Rowley was racking along, a mile behind, on the little pinto that had shared his last adventure in the Valley.

He had made up his mind to put his fortune to the test to-day. His decision had been reached only after a week of self-communion, and in the light of Sadie's obvious independence he felt at least morally certain that what he had to tell her would be listened to attentively, and acted upon with the judgment which she had shown herself, on numerous occasions, to possess in heap-
ing measure.

Jerry Rowley Proposes

He came upon her by the spring at the eastern end of the mesa. There was a growth of scant herbage here of which Pedro took immediate advantage. Sadie sat at ease in her saddle, sharing, it would seem, the delight of the little animal beneath her.

Rowley called to her from a distance and she looked up; a frown momentarily clouded her eyes as he issued from his own dust cloud, but as he drew nearer she smiled and waved her hand.

As for Pedro, he did not so much as lift his head.

"Takin' a little ride?" inquired Rowley, sweeping off his sombrero, and wiping his forehead with the cuff of his shirt sleeve.

"I wanted to, just for the last time," Sadie replied.

Rowley stared at her blankly.

"Y' ain't goin' away?" he gasped.

Sadie shook her head. "Pedro, I mean," she explained. "Now you're back you'll want him."

Her delicate coquetry was quite lost upon Jerry Rowley.

"Who said so?" he exclaimed.

Sadie smiled. "Nobody needed to," she replied. "I was going to return him this evening, but if you want him now"—she hesitated and let fall her eyes.

"Say," Rowley chuckled, "quit yer kiddin'. What you s'pose I rode out here after yeh fer? That blamed cayuse? Quit yer kiddin'."

"And I never thanked you for the saddle either," Sadie went on, a little flash of memory recalling to her what McGregor had said. "I do now, though."

Sadie

Rowley moved uneasily and his leathers creaked. Sadie looked away.

"Had t' have one anyway," he declared. "Did yeh ride much?"

It was quite apparent that he was prospecting for an opening. He knew very well what he desired to say, but how best to say it, under the circumstances, was perplexing. He was certain it would be easier if, instead of here on horseback, he were seated beside Sadie on the siding, back at the eating house.

"Much!" she exclaimed. "Why, Mr. Rowley, I've got those Indian boys faded off the desert. I guess I've hit it up harder 'round here than anybody ever did before. Don't you think Pedro shows it?" And leaning forward she stroked the pony's neck.

Rowley chuckled and urged his own horse nearer.

"Looks fat 'nough," he declared, eying her mount critically, "too fat if anything."

Thereupon a silence fell between them.

"I see," Rowley observed irrelevantly, after a space, "that little polecat, McGre——"

"Stop!" The command sprang from the girl's lips.

The man thrust his face forward, amazement written in his wide eyes.

"I didn't mean to speak so sharp," Sadie apologized, "but that poor little fellow's going to die; he's dying now, out here, all alone. Can you think what that means? And you haven't got any right to call him names."

Her anger was none the less apparent in her flaming cheeks and flashing eyes.

Jerry Rowley Proposes

Rowley gulped and swallowed. "Miss Mor'son," he began, and paused.

"I don't make any bones of saying what I think, you know," Sadie continued. "I know all about that row between you and Skinny——"

Jerry shifted his seat uneasily.

"—— for he told me. And you were in the wrong of it, Mr. Rowley; dead wrong. Besides, Allie's going to marry Al Tunnison, over't Cottonwood—but you needn't tell anybody."

Rowley's fat jaw fell. He took off his sombrero again and rubbed his head where the sun-bleached hair was thinning.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exploded.

Sadie bit her lip. "I guess you will be," was her reply, "if you don't treat that poor, little, sick fellow better'n you have."

"Now look here, Miss Mor'son"—he urged his horse so near that their stirrups touched—"I didn't foller you over't the mesa jest t' have a argyment with yeh——" Sadie's eyes danced. He made a wide gesture.

"Fur from it," he declared. "If *you* say I done wrong tryin' t' lay out this here Skinny party, why I stand c'rected. Leastways I won't say you're mistaken." He coughed. Sadie nodded.

Rowley realized that he had permitted himself to drift far from the real purpose of his pursuit, and that to avoid the surrender of further ground he must plunge. So—

"Miss Mor'son, how old d'yeh s'pose I am?"

Sadie

The interrogation was fairly fired at her. For an instant she was dazed by its impact upon her intelligence.

"Why, Mr. Rowley"—she stammered, then she caught herself and said, "I don't know as I've given it any thought."

"Well, take a good look, and say," he urged.

Tilting her head to one side, like a listening bird, she studied his beaming countenance.

"Don't be afraid of hurting m' feelin's," he enjoined.

Nothing could have been further from Sadie's inclination. Besides, she had never before been permitted to obtain "such a good look" at Jerry. In the Valley he had lost more of his already scant hair. His face was tanned by the sun and ever-present alkali to the color of the shoes she stood in, but his nose—she took especial note of his nose—had suffered a partial eclipse, in that nearly all its former rosy tint was gone. Over a mouth the lines of which were not apparent his melancholy mustache drooped, ragged and grizzled.

"I know I ain't no ravin' beauty," he declared helpfully.

Sadie drew her lower lip between her teeth.

"What d'yeh say?" he urged.

Never before had feminine eyes dwelt so long upon his countenance. Under the scrutiny he beamed like a sun.

"Well — Mr. — Rowley," Sadie began hesitatingly. Then, with a long breath she announced her verdict:

"You may be forty-three, but you don't look it!"

Jerry Rowley Proposes

"By golly!" was the explosive rejoinder, "and here I was fifty-four last April!"

"No!" Sadie gasped and clicked her tongue.

"Yes, sir—I mean ma'am—I was——"

"Why, Mr. Rowley," she exclaimed, "it don't seem possible."

He shot her a quick glance, but in her face was expressed only the wonder of her words.

"Mebbe," he chanced slyly, "it's because I ain't ever been married."

The connection was somewhat foggy, but Sadie agreed.

"I wouldn't be a bit s'prised if that was it," she said.

"And d'yeh know, Miss Mor'son," he went on soberly, "I b'en a-thinkin' it over. I did a lot of thinkin' up there in the Valley, 'specially nights, under the stars. Lord, what a lot of 'em there is up there and how clost they are! And d'yeh know what I thought about, mostly?"

Sadie shook her head. "No, Mr. Rowley, what?" Leaning over the pommel of the saddle she ran her fingers through Pedro's sparse mane.

"How they wasn't anybody give a— I mean how they wasn't anybody cared a—a' tall whether I came back or not."

"O Mr. Rowley!"—and there was a note of caressing reproof in her voice—"don't say that. Why, everybody cared—Billy, and Mr. Robinson, and Mr. Sansome, and José, even Skinny, and—and—Mr. Rowley, *I* cared, too."

"*You* cared," he whispered hoarsely.

Sadie

"How could I help caring," she went on, "after you'd been so good to me? Didn't you leave Pedro for me? Wouldn't that make me care?"

Rowley's cracked lips puckered like the tightly drawn mouth of a purse.

"Curly said as how there ought to be somebody back—home—as cared even more'n that."

Curly Watrous! At mention of the name Sadie experienced a tightening about her heart. Her breath trembled. Curly! She was back in the gallery of the dance hall at San Luis. Across the floor she saw him, one leg flung over the corner of the table. Every little detail of his picturesque range costume was vivid—his great, shaggy, angora chaps, his spurs on which the lamplight twinkled, his belt sagging at the hips, his blue-flannel shirt, the red 'kerchief loosely knotted at the throat, his smiling lips, his bold, blue eyes, his hair, golden, wavy—hair that seemed to catch the yellow light and hold it. Then, later, under the torch in the yard, why had her heart leaped in her bosom, beholding him, this stranger, there? Why should it tighten now at mention of his name? A little shiver passed over her.

"When's Mr. Watrous coming back?" she asked.

"Who? Oh, Curly; I dunno. But as I was sayin'——"

"Weren't you together over there?"

"He went on farther North. Y'know when he said that 'bout somebody carin'——"

"Where'd he go?" Sadie persisted.

"Up Furnace Creek sommers; I dunno. Him an' me

Jerry Rowley Proposes

didn't have nothin' in common after we got there. Miss Mor'son, layin' out under them millions an' millions o' stars, nights——"

"But he's coming back some time, isn't he?"

Rowley twisted uneasily and ran a thick forefinger around the inside of his collar.

"I guess so. As I was sayin'," he began again and Sadie offered no further interruption, "I thought a heap about it." Leaning over he placed one hand on the cantle of her saddle. "Now, Miss Mor'son, listen: I got three claims over there'n the Valley, and they're rich. When th' railroad comes through I'll be rich——"

"Oh, I'm so glad!" was Sadie's eager cry.

"And if you'll only say th' word"—he drew back—"they're your'n."

"Mine!" she gasped.

"Yes, sir—I mean ma'am—your'n."

"But, Mr. Rowley"—she protested.

"If," he interrupted, "you'll—you'll—well, if you'll marry me."

He had delivered the shot, and now, as if fearing the return fire, he shrank back in the saddle.

Sadie looked away. She felt his hand on her shoulder, as he pleaded: "Yeh ain't cryin', are yeh? I didn't mean y' should cry."

She shook her head slowly. Breathlessly he waited. After an æon she turned and her honest eyes met his. The hand she held out to him he took in both his own—letting the reins slide down the pinto's neck—as if it were an egg and he were wearing gauntlets of mail.

"Mr. Rowley, listen," she said, nor attempted to withdraw her hand. "I'm just as proud as I can be to think that you should say to me what you've said. Any girl would have reason to be proud. Did you ever think, Mr. Rowley, what a hard time a girl has—some girls, I mean—a girl like me? Of course all of 'em don't. I s'pose there *are* girls—I know there are, for I used to see lots of 'em back in Kansas City—that don't have a thing in the world to think about but just themselves. I wonder how't would feel just to think about yourself all the time. Lord! I guess, I ain't like most girls."

"Y' ain't," Rowley declared.

Sadie smiled into his brimming eyes.

"And mostly," she went on, "what that kind of a girl thinks about is who she's going to marry, and when. Because I *don't* think things like that 's another reason makes me believe I'm different. I guess I like to be free too much——"

"You'd be jest as free as y' are now," Rowley promised eagerly.

"No, I wouldn't," she contradicted, with a smile. "Mr. Rowley, you've been awful good to me ever since I came to Bagdad, and I've sort o' looked on you as a friend—a dear, kind friend—and you can't understand what that means to a girl like me—I mean to know that there's one man—a strong, fine man—that *is* her friend."

She looked down.

"I *could* marry you, Mr. Rowley." She paused.

"Could yeh!" he cried hoarsely, pressing her hand until she winced.

Jerry Rowley Proposes

"Yes, I *could*, and maybe I'd be a good wife, too."

She saw his chin tremble.

"But all the time there'd be the chance I wouldn't be a good wife," she went on, avoiding his rapt gaze. "I'm a funny girl, Mr. Rowley; and sometimes when I think how funny I am it kind o' scares me. I'm going to tell you something I never told a man—anybody—in my life before." She lifted her brave eyes to his. "Some day I'm going to meet the man that'll be all the world to me. When he comes I'll know him; oh, I'll know him as if I'd known him for more'n a million years! I'll just *feel* it. He won't have to tell me. There won't anybody have to tell me. I won't even have to tell m'self. I'll just know it, like I know the sun's sinking over there in the West, at the other end of this mesa. S'pose I married you, and then, afterwards, *he* came?"

Slowly his fingers relaxed and she withdrew her hand.

"'Course you'd kill him," she went on quietly, "but what good would that do? It wouldn't give *you* my love for *him*——"

The shadow of the mesa crept out upon the sand. The cottonwoods overhanging the spring whispered in the rising breeze.

"And it's 'cause I like you so much, so very much—Jerry" (he looked up, smiling as she spoke the name) "that it wouldn't be best to do it. I don't know any other man I'd tell the things I've told you, but I know you understand, for you do, don't you, Jerry?"

The note of wistfulness in her voice aroused within him all the tenderness he was capable of feeling.

Sadie

He leaned over the horn of his saddle and drew up the reins.

"It's all right," he answered huskily, "it's all right. I'm glad yeh tol' me. They ain't many wimmin that would, I guess." The mist had gone out of his eyes and in them now was a glow of fidelity. "It's jest that in yeh, Sadie, that makes a feller love yeh. You're on the level. That's it; you're on th' level." His great paw shot out. "Put 'er there!"

And across the little chasm between their horses their hands met, as the hands of partners might meet, across a camp fire in the desert.

"If they's ever anythin' old Jerry Rowley c'n do fer you, you jest ask him an' see how long it takes him t' do it!"

"Do you really mean that?" asked Sadie eagerly. "For if you do there is something—now. It's little Skinny. His finish is going to come before long, and—and—before it does, can't you—*can't* you forget all the old trouble—for me—Jerry?"

On Rowley's part there was not an instant of hesitation. He stretched forth his hand a second time:

"Put 'er there again!" he exclaimed. "For anything you say goes with me!"

And releasing her hand, squeezed white, he swept off his sombrero with all the ancient courtliness of one of those Dons whom he hated with so fine a hate.

Side by side they rode back through the rosy sunset light, to Bagdad.

Jerry Rowley Proposes

"'Bout Pedro," he suddenly recalled as the eating house came into view, "I want yeh t' have him jest fer a present, saddle, too. And d'yeh care if I keep on callin' th' richest claim of th' three, 'The Sadie'?"

"After me!" she cried delightedly.

"After you," he declared.

She told him how proud she would be and his old face beamed, while in her own was reflected all the joy his promises aroused in her.

And thus it was that Billy Thompson, standing in the kitchen doorway, saw them, and the conclusion that he drew from their faces was all at odds with the facts, for he turned on his heel and reëntered the kitchen, muttering:

"The coin gets the girl out here, just like it does—back home."

CHAPTER XVI

SADIE EXPLAINS

DISILLUSIONMENT came to Billy Thompson the next afternoon. With that candor which of all her characteristics most appealed to him, Sadie confessed that Rowley had offered her his hand and 'dobe—not to speak of his claims.

She had seen him from the window of her room; he was sitting on a pile of lumber where the Palace was building, and she joined him there. When she had finished speaking he replied without lifting his eyes to her smiling face:

"I thought he was layin' to do it when he told me about the mine, and what he'd named it."

"I hope the name won't be a Jonah," she said.

"It's worth thinking about, seems to me—Rowley, I mean," he went on.

Sadie shook her head.

"I guess it ain't for mine, Billy," she declared.

"That so?" He slapped his leg with his quirt and gazed off across the sand. From the end of her eye she studied his clear-cut profile.

"I doped it all out a long time ago," she went on, smoothing her skirt across the knees. His eyes did not shift from their steady contemplation of the desert's limitless sweep.

Sadie Explains

"I had a couple of chances, back in K. C. I'd have taken one of 'em, maybe if—well, I didn't. And since I've been out here it's all as clear as the mesa over there in the sunshine. Did you ever think what it means for a girl like me to get married, Billy? Did you? A working girl, I mean; one that's been up against it for as far back as she can remember, almost, and has had to look out for number one every minute of the day."

"I can see how it might mean a lot," replied Billy lightly.

His eyes shifted to her face and a little smile flickered in them to meet the smile in her own. She shook her head, almost wearily it seemed to him.

"A girl like—well, say a girl like me—ain't fitted to every man. Maybe she's got hopes, Billy, and aspirations. She knows the chances are ten million to one they'll never be realized, but she nurses 'em along just the same. The men she is fitted to marry don't stack up; I mean the men in her class. They're just two spots, Billy, and that's what makes it hurt so. She's hungry for something to eat that she's never tasted and knows she probably never will. She wants to be champagne and pop, when she's only beer and gurgles. That's the dope, Billy."

A little dry laugh crackled in his throat.

"Beer goes better'n champagne—out here," he replied.

"Maybe," she agreed doubtfully, "but out here and now ain't everywhere and always."

Sadie

In the little silence that followed, Billy studied the toes of his shoes. His fingers, tightly clasped around one knee, were long and slim, singularly feminine; the nails were pink and almond shaped and fastidiously kept, but remembering, Sadie realized the deception of those girlish fingers. In the tremble of the heat waves above the sand she saw again Lawton's purple face, the bulging, red-rimmed eyes, the horror stamped upon the brutal countenance, and locked in front around the thick and pulpy neck, she saw those same fingers, tight as steel bands, and bloodless white. A little shiver passed over her at the memory and her eyelids drooped.

Presently she reached out her hand and let it lie on Billy's arm.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Nothing," he lied.

"What we've been talking about?" she persisted.

He nodded. "I was just thinking," he observed ruminatively, "how that fellow happened to let you get away from him."

"Who? Lacy?"

The name had sprung unbidden to her tongue. She bit her lip and looked away.

Billy turned to her, a queer little look in his eyes.

"You didn't mention any name before," he replied dryly.

"It was a mistake. I—I—" she hesitated, "I didn't mean to. I hadn't thought about him till now."

She was sharply angry with herself.

"Forget him," Billy muttered, "forget him."

Sadie Explains

His impertinent injunction brought the smile back to her eyes. "There, that's better," he told her, "but," he added, "you hadn't ought to let a little thing like that sour you. It ain't givin' the others a square deal."

"But there ain't any others," she declared with emphasis. "That's what I mean. Look here"—she turned and faced him—"who's the fellow that a girl like me could marry—just naturally, you know? I'll tell you—a shipping clerk down in some railroad office. A guy that never earned over eighteen a week in his life. And she's working, too, you know, tucking away her little old ten, or maybe twelve, every Saturday night. And she's her own boss. Don't lose sight of that, for that's the most. It's worth more'n the money, even, just bein' her own boss. Well, she marries the guy. Of course when she does she quits her job and passes up the ten or twelve per. And they go to housekeeping—she and Charley-boy—in a flat over a butcher shop that costs fifteen dollars a month. The place is full of old gold, spindle-legged furniture bought on the instalment plan. You know the advertisements in the street cars back East: 'Let Foster Feather Your Nest. Four Rooms Furnished Complete For Seventy-Five Dollars. Your Credit Is Good!' Chairs that squeak when you sit on 'em; a sofa with roses as big as cabbages—green roses—and that's always coming unglued; an easel in the two-by-twice parlor with the picture of an old mill in a snow-storm in a silver frame; and a plush album on the almost-mahogany table, with pictures of Charley-boy's sisters

in it in their confirmation dresses. And the girl does the cooking on an eight-dollar—'dollar down and dollar a week'—gas stove that the company connected for nothing. Then after the first youngun' comes and she's wearing a calico wrapper and curl papers till four o'clock in the afternoon, she sits down some morning by the window looking out on the street-car tracks, while little Charley, that looks like the It she married's asleep, and lines it all out. She's been in a trance. Before she passed away it was her for the Park with the other girls on her afternoon off, vaudeville every Saturday all winter, and a show every night if she wanted to go. Now it's a case of kid, wash, socks, shirt and a mop. She couldn't go to a show if she wanted to on account of little Charley, and on Sundays big Charley'd rather sit in the parlor in his stocking feet or out on the back porch in his suspenders than *do* anything. What's she done? She's quit bein' her own boss at ten or twelve a week to be Charley-boy's hired girl at nothing a year. That's the dope, Billy. Fine business, ain't it?"

Billy's smile had widened and now, as she ceased speaking, he threw back his head and laughed.

"But you've left out the best part of it, Sadie," he declared, when he had caught his breath.

"What?" she blankly inquired.

"The part that made her marry him in the first place."

A look of puzzlement came into her eyes.

"The love, I mean," he explained.

"Love!" she cried. "Love! O Billy, quit your kiddin'!"

Sadie Explains

"Don't girls ever love the fellows they marry?" he inquired testily.

"Maybe." There was no laughter in her own eyes now. "Maybe—*when* they marry 'em. Even then I guess it's mostly a case of hypnotism. But it ain't *then* I've been talking about. It's afterwards. Billy"—he perceived that she was serious—"when a girl says she loves the fellow that's handed her out the biggest gold brick on earth, she lies. That's what she does. She lies, and I'd tell her so, too, if she ever tried to four-flush in front of me. That's why I say it ain't for mine. No siree!" And she shook her head so vigorously her pompadour trembled.

Billy laughed again, then inquired blandly:

"Did you tell Jerry all this?"

"Not so plain maybe. I was afraid he wouldn't understand. But I guess he caught what I meant, all right," she replied.

Billy rose, declaring vehemently:

"Sadie, you're a peach!"

She smiled almost wistfully and he caught a glimpse of the glinting gold of her teeth.

"It's true," he went on, "I know it, only it wouldn't be if you were the girl."

"I'd like to know why not?" she inquired blankly.

"Because if you were, that eighteen-dollar clerk would be the general freight agent of the whole line inside of two years. That's why not."

"Is that a compliment, Billy?" she asked, rising and shaking out her skirt.

"I don't know about it's being a compliment," he replied, "but it's the truth." From the distance came the shriek of a locomotive's whistle. "Here comes Number 3," he added; "let's mosey over, maybe there'll be some mail."

CHAPTER XVII

THE CONFESSION OF SKINNY

AS Thompson's step sounded on the stairs, Sadie slipped a bill into the envelope and sealed it. She tried valiantly to smile at him as he appeared on the threshold. Since last night he had known that something was wrong. It must have been the letter Sansome gave her after the arrival of Number 3, he concluded, little knowing how accurate the conclusion was. Perhaps she would tell him. At any rate he would not inquire.

"Fernandez was just in downstairs," he said. "Skinny's quit."

"For good?"

Billy nodded.

"The poor little chap," she murmured, and turning stared blankly out the window.

"Sansome says he brought back a bottle of iodine this morning, and said he guessed he wouldn't need it any more."

"He knows it's almost over," Sadie said.

"It's the way usually," Billy went on, studying the pattern of his plaid cuff; "it's when they begin to feel better that they're going. I've seen a lot of it out here."

Sadie made no reply and Billy changed the subject.

Sadie

"Have you heard from the girl?" he asked.

She turned from the window then and there was some of the familiar light in her eyes.

"Yes, she'll come whenever I wire her. I—I've just written. I was going to take it down when you came up; I want it to go out on Number 6."

"We'll open on the first, all right," Billy went on. "I talked to Al over the 'phone an hour ago. Rowley's got the bill of the carpets. They're going to send a new man out from the System. Stevens may come himself at first. Thought I'd let you know. I guess I'd engage a couple of Mexican women for the start-off if I were you."

Sadie rose.

"I will," she said; then, hesitatingly, "I wonder if I hadn't better go over and see Skinny?"

"Come along; I'll go with you," Billy proposed.

He slipped his hand under her arm as they crossed Main Street. Passing the "Monte" Sadie glanced within and saw a stranger seated behind the wheel.

"Look!" she muttered.

The stranger did not lift his eyes from the pink sheet he was perusing.

"Poor little chap," said Billy. "The new man's from San Luis," he told her; "I remember him at the Palace down there—and there's *our* Palace."

Skinny was lying on the cot when Billy appeared in the A of the tent, but when, behind, he perceived Sadie, he sat up, smiling.

"I'm mighty glad you came over, it was getting

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kind o' lonesome," he said; and then, "Billy, you got the 'makin's'? I'm all out."

The little book of papers and cambric bag were produced forthwith.

"Do you s'pose you ought to smoke as much as you do, Skinny?" Sadie asked. "If you cut it out wouldn't you feel better?"

The little fellow chuckled throatily.

"Who put that in your head?" he inquired as he moistened the paper and bent the end; "Jerry Rowley? That's what *he* said."

"*He* said!" Billy exclaimed. He stared wonderingly, first at McGregor, then at Sadie. There was a twinkle in the former's eyes, but Sadie's were lowered and a wave of color crept across her cheek.

"What d'yeh mean?"

Skinny's cigarette was fairly burning now.

"I guess some little bird must have got him off in a corner and told him he was crazy from the heat or something," he explained.

"You've seen him?" Billy Thompson's amazement was obvious.

The thin little figure on the cot inhaled a mouthful of smoke and coughed it out in a thin, blue cloud.

"Yep," he declared.

"Wouldn't that jar you!" Thompson exclaimed. "How'd it happen?"

Skinny crossed his slim legs.

"Well," he began, "I was settin' here 'long 'bout 'leven o'clock this mornin' tryin' to beat m'self at a game

of seven-card solitaire, when in walks Jerry. I gave a quick look 'round. No use. My gun was layin' way over there by the pail, and not a load in it at that. He had me dead to rights, and one hand was under his coat-tail—behind."

Dramatically he paused and took another deep pull at the cigarette. Sadie did not lift her eyes.

"And then what happened?" Billy urged.

"Well"—McGregor hesitated, and glanced first at one, then the other of his hearers—"I said t' m'self, 'here's where you have a quick finish.' But I didn't. Instead of drawin' and blazin' away, there he stood grinnin' like a chessy cat. Then all of a sudden, as I dodged, he whips out the hand he'd been carryin' under his coat-tail, and what d'yeh suppose was in it?"

Sadie's eyes lifted.

"What?" demanded Billy.

"Can o' tomatoes!"

Billy collapsed.

"A can of tomatoes!" Sadie gasped.

McGregor nodded soberly.

"A quart can, too. And he set 'em right down on the solitaire game and proceeded to open 'em with that sword of his he calls a pocket knife. When he gets the top off he reaches down in an inside pocket and digs up a couple of shiny, new spoons. Then somewhere else around his person he uncovers a pay streak of cheese and opens up a pocket of crackers, and sets 'em both down 'longside the can. I kep' starin' at him with my eyes stickin' out like the bronze door knobs on a Pullman

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car for the blamed old shine *hadn't said a word*. When dinner's all ready he pulls out that soap box over there and straddles it. Then lookin' me square in the eye he clears his throat and says: 'I'm pretty damn hungry; ain't you? Dip in.' And I dipped. That broke the ice and there we set, lickin' up cold canned tomatoes and plantin' crackers and cheese, like we was shipwrecked sailors on a desert isle. Talk? He talked like he meant to make up for all the time he'd lost the past year and a half. It was a regular sewin' circle, and when we were so full of tomatoes they were oozin' out of our eyes, he springs a couple of *maduro* Lola Montez *perfectos*, and we lit up and talked some more. He told me all the news about himself, the claim——"

The whistle of Number 6 sounded from the distance.

"My letter!" Sadie recalled.

"Here, give it to me," Thompson exclaimed, and snatching it from her hand sprang through the tent entrance.

"—I don't know what made him do it," McGregor added.

It may have been that in Sadie's eyes, as they met his, he read the truth, for a flush came into his cheek, and he appeared about to speak, but, instead, looked down, and missed the smile that bent Sadie's lips, and that perhaps would have told him more even than her eyes.

"What do you hear from back East?" he asked, as if to change the subject. "Everything all right?"

Sadie glanced at him, shook her head, hesitated, then replied:

"My mother's dead, Skinny."

"Sadie!" McGregor leaned forward and held out his hand. She was very near to crying, but still she smiled.

"Maybe I don't know what that sort of thing means," he said. "Have you told Billy?"

"Not yet. I don't know whether to tell him or not; would you?"

"It wouldn't do any good, would it?" he replied, and she shook her head.

"I telegraphed the Sisters," she explained; "maybe Robinson will tell him."

"Oh, no, he won't!" Skinny assured her; "he ain't that kind."

"It came so sudden I ain't quite over it yet," she said. "And yet I shouldn't have been surprised at all. You know how it is to be conscious a thing's going to happen—oh, for ever so long!—and when it *does* it knocks the breath out of you just the same."

"I know," he agreed. "It's the same when you've got what I have. Nobody knows better'n I do it's going to git me sooner 'r later—sooner, I guess—but when it does I'll be just as much surprised as if I hadn't known it all the time."

He read the question in her eyes.

"'Bout cashin' in, I mean," he explained.

She had not meant to bring him thus to himself, or even to refer to his having left the "Monte." She leaned toward him and stroked his hand.

"What's the use talking that way?" she reproved.

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His eyes fell to her hand where it lay upon his thin wrist, and when he lifted them it was to smile.

"Maybe I don't know," he declared. "Nobody better."

The evening breeze was rising, stirring the flaps of the tent.

"Good Lord! I've known it—known it and been waiting—for four years."

"Was that why you came out here in the first place, Skinny?" she asked. The tent was filled with golden light. A little gust loosened a lock of her hair and brushed it across her cheek.

"It was the bugs," he replied; "but I didn't have 'em—then."

"Why, what do you mean?" she asked curiously.

"It was m' step-brother; the old man's son—Jim." He coughed. "He was thirteen years old when m' mother married the old man. I wasn't any more'n nine or so."

He had never mentioned his people to her before and she doubted if even Billy knew. He coughed again, a rattling, deathly cough that sent a shiver over her.

"What did she do it for?" she asked blankly.

"Who? M' mother? I dunno. It was the old man more'n 't was her. She knew him before she married m' father. I guess they both wanted her and m' father won out. Then the old man up and married somebody else, out o' spite, looked like. The whole bunch of 'em lived right there in Cleveland, you know. The old man had a place on Superior Street and was makin' a bundle.

Sadie

Something was the matter with m' father, I guess. Maybe he was sick; I dunno. He was a stonecutter, good for five a day when he worked, but when m' little sister died—she was only a baby—it seemed to kind o' knock him out. M' mother used to tell me how much m' father thought of the little thing. I don't remember her at all. Her name was 'Margy.' I was only three when she was born. M' mother used to tell me afterwards how m' father'd go out to Elmwood Sundays with flowers for her. I used to go with him sometimes, too—m' father, 'n' m' mother, 'n' I. I don't remember much about it, though. I suppose the little grave's there yet, but I guess there don't anybody"—his voice became a whisper—"take—flowers—out—there—any—more."

"Poor little thing," murmured Sadie.

"Lucky—just lucky," was the quiet response.

The golden light was slowly vanishing as the desert evening closed in around them.

"M' father died when I was six," the loose, hollow voice went on in the shadow, "so I don't remember him so very much either. He used to be good to m' mother, though. She'd tell me a long time afterwards 'bout the things he'd do—like taking us all on Sunday excursions over to Put-in Bay, and the picnics of the Union, and theaters. Afterwards all the real happiness she ever seemed to get was thinking about those times. I remember one day I came on her in our kitchen, over the old man's place, where we lived—afterwards—came on her kind o' sudden. She was standing by the back window looking down on the alley—standing there crying softly,

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all to herself. I didn't make a bit of noise, but something must of told her I'd come in, for she just turned, calm, and came to me and knelt down and put her arms around me and kissed me. I asked her what she was thinkin' about that made her cry so—I was only a kid, you know, and couldn't understand—but she didn't say anything, just wiped her eyes, and smiled, and shook her head. That's all. But I know *now* what she was thinking about."

The shadow voice fell silent.

Without speaking Sadie rose and seating herself beside him took one of his hot, thin hands in both her own.

"Don't tell me any more, Skinny, if it makes you feel so," she said.

A smile flickered an instant in his sunken eyes and reaching up he caught between his fingers the lock of her hair that the wind had loosened, caressing it.

"It don't hurt me any," he said, "it's all so long ago. Why, it's so long ago that sometimes when I'm sittin' here alone, and get to thinkin' of it, it don't seem like it ever happened, really—more like I'd dreamed it. And I never told a livin' soul about it before and don't know why I tell you, only somehow I sorter like to tell it—to you."

"Skinny." Under the caress of her voice he closed his eyes. And she felt now as many times she had before; if only she might take this child—this little lost child—in her arms and comfort him.

"And then m' father died," he went on. "He'd always taken good care of us, m' mother'n me, but he

had to scrape hard to do it, with his sickness and the strikes, and all. There wasn't any money left, just a little insurance, and mother sold all the things we could get along without, and we moved out to Brooklyn. It wasn't much of a suburb then, like it is now. M' mother did washin' and anything else she could find, and I went to school. It was five years 'fore the old man discovered her. She'd had to work hard and I guess she wasn't as pretty as she'd been—once. The old man's wife had died the year before and had left him Jim. I've always thought it was more because he wanted somebody to look after Jim that the old man asked m' mother to marry him than because *he* really wanted her. I never heard him talk to her but once. It was one Sunday afternoon. I'd been out on the Commons behind our house, and when I came in through the woodshed I heard him in the kitchen. Lord, he was layin' it on thick! M' mother didn't have much to say. He was doin' it all. That was his way. Told her she'd no business to work the way she did. I just stood there in the woodshed with m' arms full of kindlin's and listened. He told her how well he was doin', had four or five thousand in the Society for Savings, a lot or two over west o' town, and a little street-car stock. The brewery had backed his place and it was doin' fine, he even thought of openin' another, and all like that, you know. It was clear what he was up to and I wondered what m' mother'd say. Then finally she began to talk. I couldn't stand it any longer and made a sneak, carryin' the kindlin's out in the backyard so's not to make a noise. I didn't come in till

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supper time and he'd gone. M' mother acted kind o' different, and after supper, when she'd washed the dishes and I'd wiped 'em and put 'em away in the cupboard, we set down in the sittin' room and she told me; told me just what it would mean, and all. She wouldn't have to work so hard and we'd have a good home, and plenty to eat, and plenty to wear. There was a picture of m' father in the sittin' room, a picture m' mother had a man enlarge from a photograph. It had a swell silver frame on it and stood on an easel in the corner. When she'd told me all it'd mean, she turned and pointed to the picture and said: 'Do you think he'd care, Sammy?' She always called me 'Sammy.' What could I say after what she'd told me? I could see, though, she didn't want to, really. It was the work, and she was tired, and sometimes when I think of it, seems 's if maybe it was on account of me. Anyway when she pointed to the picture and asked me, I told her I thought if m' father knew he'd be glad. That seemed to settle it, and the next spring they were married and we moved downtown over the old man's place. He'd fixed the flat all over so's it wouldn't look like it did when his first wife was livin', and it was a lot different from the little house we'd had out'n Brooklyn. I've always thought that was pretty decent of the old man to fix it over like he did, don't you?"

"There ain't maty men would have done it," Sadie replied.

"I saw right off that Jim thought the same as I did about it. He'd been one of those picture kids, you know. His mother'd made him wear velvet pants and little dinky

socks, the kind that fix it easy for the mosquitoes in a town like Cleveland. He wasn't so bad, though; not very strong, kind o' frail. Standin' behind him you could look right through his ears; that ain't ever a good sign. But things went on all right for several years. The old man's place kept making more and more money and m' mother *did* have a lot of things she'd never had before. I s'pose most women would h've shook hands with themselves, but somehow m' mother never did. There weren't any more picnics or excursions over to Put-in Bay, and the old man used to lap up more o' the booze than was good for him. He didn't get drunk; that is, really drunk, just about half-pickled all the time. He wasn't ugly or anything like that, only, you see m' father'd never touched it, and m' mother couldn't seem to get used to it in the old man."

"I know," Sadie said softly, "I know what that sort of thing means."

"Far as I was concerned," McGregor went on, "I didn't have no kick coming. I just didn't count—with the old man—that's all. He never landed on me very hard, and whenever he did, I guess, likely, he had reason enough. I wasn't any angel then more'n I am now."

He smiled and coughed.

"Fact is, he was worried 'bout Jim, even then. He couldn't go to school regular, Jim couldn't, and afterwards, when I got a job down at the big gum factory—in the shipping room—Jim wanted one, too. But he only lasted three months; the work was too hard. Jim was all right only he wasn't *there*—you know—sick and

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weak. Then came that hard winter five years ago. Maybe you remember it—worst in years. It put Jim clean to the bad. He got pneumonia and only pulled through by a nose. Then in the spring the Doc said he'd have to go West or croak—whichever he wanted. There was sure hell to pay then. I thought the old man'd go plumb nutty. You see he couldn't come out here with Jim—or thought he couldn't—on account of the business, and m' mother she couldn't either. They didn't know what to do. Then I told 'em I'd go with Jim if they wanted I should. At first the old man didn't think it would do any good, and poohed the idea. I'd wanted to get away though, and this looked like a chance, so one Sunday m' mother and I talked it all over, and finally she made the old man see it was the best way, too.

“Jim didn't seem to realize just how sick he was, looked at it like he was goin' on a trip. When we left Cleveland mother give me twenty-five dollars, and her Bible, and a little crucifix father'd got for her from a missionary up around St. Anne's. The old man came with us as far as Chicago; we had almost the whole day to wait there. Him and Jim loafed around the depot, but I hit the sidewalk. God, how I walked! I guess I hiked over that town from Lincoln Park to the stock-yards, 'n' from the lake front 'way over West where the houses were kind o' scattered; all in that one day.”

Sadie laughed.

“On the square I did.”

A cough shook his slight frame and he beat his flat breast with his clenched fists.

Sadie looked away.

"Damn 'em!" he muttered.

The spasm passed and he continued. "The Doc in Cleveland give us a letter to a Doc he knew in Denver, and when we saw him and he'd looked Jim over he told us to pull freight for the open. So we went down to Colorado Springs. Ever been there? Fine place; pretty as a picture, with old Pike's Peak sticking up in the air right at the end of the avenue, behind The Antlers. One of the prettiest places you ever saw, only all the folks that can't breathe back East go out there and—you know. The old man sent us money regular—seventy-five, or a hunderd on the first of every month. That was enough, the way we lived. But Jim he didn't seem to get any better. He didn't get any worse neither—that is, not fast. But when the bugs are in you here"—he tapped his breast—"they ain't asleep. 'Course he was getting worse all the time, only you couldn't seem to notice it."

Sadie shivered and looked away.

"It was 'bout a year and a half after we came out that Jim hit the toboggan—fast. I telegraphed the old man and he wired back that m' mother was sick and he couldn't come. I hadn't had a letter from her for nearly a month. Then one day when the Doc came to see Jim I followed him out'n the hall and asked him 'bout how long he thought it would be. He said it might be 'most any time, then he gave me a sorter funny look, and felt my pulse, and told me to come over 'n' see him the next morning. I didn't think anything about it then, but the next morning I dropped in 't his office. It was

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over a dry-goods store in a big brick building on Tejon Street, I remember. He felt o' me, and thumped me, and put a machine on my gizzard, and listened, then he asked me if I eat much. I told him I didn't—very much. Then he asked me if I coughed and I told him I did sometimes, in the mornin'. 'I thought so,' he said. I asked him what it was all about, then, and he told me. You could have knocked me over with a feather. You see I'd been sorter nursing Jim and—well—I'd got it—got it from him, that's all."

The long shadows were creeping across the desert; twilight was deepening. The evening breeze stirred the flaps of canvas at the tent entrance. The strains of a concertina, singularly sweet in the stillness, were borne them from the distance.

"As long as I live," the thin voice droned on, "I'll never forget the night Jim died. It was in a little back room of the Bijou House in Manitou, right up against a mountain. There wasn't anybody there but me. For two weeks Jim had been living on whisky and he knew what was coming as well as I did. It was about half past ten. He'd slept a little, earlier in the evenin'. There was a lamp on the table, turned low, and I set by it, watchin'. I hadn't told him, or written the folks what the Doc had told me, and I just watched Jim, layin' there asleep, and tried to dope it all out what I'd better do. There was a dance going on in a hotel down the street, and I could hear the band. All of a sudden Jim woke up. 'Sam, are you there?' he said. I told him I was, and took his hand. 'Listen,' he said. It was

the band he heard. He kind o' smiled and tried to nod his head in time to the music, but he was too weak. 'Why don't you light the lamp, Sam?' he asked me, low. Then I knew he was going fast. There wasn't any use callin' anybody or raisin' a row, so I just set there holding his hand. By and by his eyes opened and I leaned down. 'Sam,' he whispered, 'Sam, I'm much obliged. Good-by.' Then with all the strength he had left he squeezed m' hand, but it was such a little squeeze I could hardly feel it. That was all—just that—'much obliged'—and he was dead."

Quietly Sadie rose and went to the door of the tent and stood there looking out into the gathering night. Away off somewhere in the East was Kansas City. In a little room in a big building lay her mother, while hooded, silent women glided noiselessly about. At the head of the bed whereon the still figure lay, outlined beneath the sheet, candles burned.

"Mother, mother," the girl whispered to the deepening twilight.

"I telegraphed everything t' the old man," the voice behind went on, "'bout myself and all, and told him when Jim would get to Chicago. The Doc's brother was goin' and he saw to it, so I didn't have to go. It was just as well, for the next day the old man wired me m' mother had died. You don't know how funny it made me feel, Sadie. It didn't surprise me, or daze me, or anything like that, at all. It just made me realize that I was out here—all alone. I didn't hang around Manitou long. I went down to San Luis. There wasn't anything I

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could do especially, and for six months I herded sheep. Maybe I don't know what this desert means. You think *you* do, but you don't. You've never laid out there under the stars, beside a little *mesquite* fire, and not heard a blamed sound except when a lamb'd bleat—nothin' else—just the stars, and the little fire, and a lamb bleatin'. God! I was going nutty, and quit. I got the job at the wheel in San Luis then, and afterwards came up here. I've lived in this old tent ever since. It's the best way. It makes it longer. And now I ain't got a job at all. I've quit over at the 'Monte.' ”

Sadie turned.

“ I heard,” she said.

“ I told Sansome I was feeling a lot better,” he added and chuckled. “ It's a lie. I'm worse. That's why I quit. A new man's on the wheel. I'm through. It's me to wait—now—that's all. Missus Fernandez is awful nice to me, though, and days when I don't feel up to crawlin' over there she brings things here for me to eat. So between her *frijoles* and Jerry Rowley's canned tomatoes, I guess I'll pull through.”

He heard the catch of Sadie's breath and leaned forward.

“ And now I've gone and made you feel bad, telling you all this,” he said. “ I didn't mean to, Sadie—only I thought maybe it would make it easier for you, after—after the telegram you got.”

She went quickly to him and knelt beside his chair.

“ You have, Skinny,” she said, “ you have.”

She pressed her cheek against his hand where it lay,

Sadie

passive, on the arm of the chair. His eyes closed, and a smile of childish sweetness hovered about his lips.

"We know what it means, Skinny, don't we—you and I?" she whispered. Bending, he kissed her hair.

"Shall I light your lantern?" she asked, rising.

"Don't bother," he replied. "I like to sit here and watch the night."

An instant she lingered at the door of the tent as if to speak, but did not.

Wearily, McGregor got upon his feet and from between the flaps watched her fleeting figure as she ran diagonally across Main Street toward the eating house. Unconsciously, it seemed, he walked away from the tent, past the new hotel, out upon the tracks. Now and again he muttered to himself, and once he stopped, and raising the hand against which her cheek had pressed gazed at it, then kissed it. He was glad for the night.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN FROM KANSAS CITY

I DIDN'T mean to be so late," Sadie declared as she opened the screen-door of the eating-house kitchen. Charley looked up from the pudding he was preparing. "'Tain't late; there's time enough," he replied, and broke another egg.

"Where's Mr. Thompson?" she asked.

The cook shook his white-capped head.

"Dunno," he said. "A guy dropped off Number 4; he's outside with him, I guess."

Just then Billy's voice sounded quite close to the window and Sadie glanced out. She heard him say: "Couple of weeks more and we'd have a hotel to put you in."

The back of the man with whom he talked was toward her, but some subtle sense marked it as familiar. The shoulders were narrow and slightly bent. The man wore a slouch hat and in the light of the kitchen lamp his clothes appeared shabby. Then he turned and she was given a glimpse of his profile. One hand crept to her breast, the fingers of the other curled stiffly into the palm. With a little catch in her breath she turned quickly from the window. Charley was stirring up his

pudding in a great yellow bowl that gleamed in the lamp-light.

"I—I guess you'll—you'll have to put supper on the table," she said.

The cook turned.

"What's the matter?" he asked, ceasing to stir; "you sick? Look like you'd seen a ghost."

"I have—I mean—I mean my head aches—awful," was the confused reply. Her hand hovered over the latch of the door, as she cast a quick glance toward the window. "Tell Mr. Thompson I want to see him—when he comes in—will you?"

Charley did not answer then, but when the little door under the stairs clicked shut he muttered, with disgust: "They're all alike, only I had it figured out as how she was different."

Sadie did not stop to light the big lamp over the lunch counter, but ran swiftly up the stairs. At the top she stopped an instant and leaned forward listening, then catching her breath proceeded slowly down the narrow hallway. The door of the room at the end stood ajar. Unconsciously she walked on tiptoe as she approached. Below, she heard Charley moving around in the kitchen and whistling. Cautiously she pushed the door farther back, shrinking to one side in the darkness of the hall as she did so. The room was deep in shadow, yet she was able to distinguish the white enamel pitcher standing on the floor beside the iron washstand, the crumpled towel on the bed at the foot, and, on the chair by the window, a suit case. Noiselessly, she glided into the

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room and directly to the case. Still listening, she ran her fingers swiftly over the catches and sprung them. The case was locked. She drew in her breath sibilantly between closed teeth. As she turned away she glimpsed the initials, painted in black on the end of the case, and stooped, the more clearly to make them out.

W. W. PHILA.

Wide-eyed she shrank back and pressed a cold hand to her cheek. Sinking upon her knees beside the case she alternately stared at the letters and out the window. From the distance sounded the tinkle of a bell, and she remembered to-morrow would be pay day at the borax works and the night would be an orgy in Bagdad. With a little shiver she rose. Her first fear had given way to a feeling of puzzlement. She heard heavy footfalls on the lunch-room floor, and tiptoed out into the hallway, drawing the door half shut, as she had found it.

In her own room she flung herself upon the bed and hid her face against the pillow. She felt strangely cold, particularly her hands, and to warm them she tucked them up into the pits of her arms and pressed them hard against her body.

Charley thrust his head into the lunch room, caught Billy's eye and beckoned. The stranger was leaning against the end of the counter, nervously rolling a cigarette.

"She wants to see you," Charley whispered.

"Who?"

"Sadie."

"Where is she?"

Charley gave a little upward jerk of his head. "She came in a few minutes ago; said she was sick. I told her she looked like she'd seen a ghost. She said she had." He grinned. "It's the sun, I guess," he added.

Sadie was startled by Thompson's quick knock upon the door.

"Come in," she called weakly.

"What's the matter, Sadie?" he asked, beside the bed. "Charley said he thought maybe the sun had——"

"Yes," she broke in—there was a tremulous tensility in her voice that he had never heard before—"that's it, I guess—the sun. It's my head."

Thompson seated himself on the bed beside her. "Don't you want a light?" he asked. "You don't? Well, never mind. Don't worry. You'll feel all right in the morning. Charley can run things. Don't you worry."

Leaning over her he caught her pale smile, and perhaps in his eyes, glowing in the deep dusk of the room, she saw that which he would not have had her see, for she turned her head on the pillow and stared at the wall.

"I've been over trying to cheer up Skinny," she said. "And he's so sick it—it nearly broke my heart. He knows it won't be but a little while and——" she broke off, turned her head, and he saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

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"It made me feel so blue," she added. "That's all—that and the sun." She hesitated. "Charley said there's somebody here; who?"

"Fellow by the name of Williams," Billy told her. "Been up North; came in on Number 4——"

"What's—what's—he doing here—Billy?" she asked.

"Who? Williams? Nothing, I guess; just going through. He's broke, I reckon, from the way he talks. Looks like they'd trimmed him—up there."

He flirted a polka-dotted handkerchief from the breast pocket of his trig khaki coat and wiped his hands.

"Don't you worry," he reassured, rising. "It'll be all right. I'll go down now. You try to get some sleep."

"Oh, Billy," she called, and he turned, his hand on the latch of the door. "How—how long's Williams going to stay?"

"He seems to want to blow as soon as he can. Says he's got to. It's important," he told her.

"I see——"

The door closed; he was gone.

For a long time—hours it seemed to her—she lay on the bed—thinking—listening. What should she do? she asked herself. She wondered if she had succeeded in deceiving Billy—and doubted, fearfully. His eyes, as they searched her own, had told her nothing. They were eyes that saw everything—through everything—but only told what he would have them tell. But she *must* deceive him. She was suddenly startled by the sound of high-pitched laughter in the lunch room below. She

Sadie

realized then that it did not all remain with her—whether the others should learn. A word—a name—a question, and everything would be revealed. Her breath caught in her throat.

Noiselessly she slipped from the bed and tiptoed across the room to the little bureau. In a drawer, beneath a pile of ribbons, her trembling fingers found her rosary. It was years since last she had felt the little sliding balls as she felt them now. By the window, she fell upon her knees and lifting her eyes to the velvet sky in which a few cold stars were glittering, she prayed, the while her stiff, unfeeling fingers told the beads. . . .

“O Mary, Mother, tell me what to do. . . . I’ve been so happy here. . . . I’ve never hurt anybody. . . don’t let them hurt me. . . . Tell me what to do. . . . I can’t go on lying, always. . . . Ain’t there any other way? . . . O Mary, Mother, I’m just a girl. . . all alone. . . and I don’t know what to do.” . . .

The rosary slipped from her fingers and clicked on the floor. Clutching the sill of the window she bent her head upon her rigid arms. Thus for a moment, then she slowly lifted her face. The sound of voices—his and Billy’s—arose from the siding beneath the window. She looked down upon them, clear in the starlight. Billy turned back. She heard him in the lunch room—in the kitchen. Alone, the stranger glanced about him, then slowly walked away, down the track.

As if it were a garment loosely worn the emotional

The Man from Kansas City

stress which the girl had suffered slipped from her. Quickly she rose, crossed to the bureau, and from one of the drawers drew out the gun that Billy had given her. Holding it close to her eyes she examined it by the light of a match, and spun the loaded cylinder. Then, in the darkness again, she slipped it into the bosom of her blouse and went out into the hall and down the stairs. She heard Billy in the kitchen and cautiously crossed the lunch room. Once outside, on the cinders, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Down the track, a hundred yards, the red tank sprawled on its four slim legs. He had gone that way. Above, the night was shot with cross beams of starlight like a great spider web. The wind struck cool against her cheek. As she hastened on, she felt, now and then, for the little gun, lying loosely in her blouse, and as she drew near the tank she slipped two of the buttons and thrusting her hand inside, gripped it, covering the hammer with her thumb, that, suddenly withdrawn, it might not catch the cloth. Behind the tank loomed dimly the pile of ties. The shadow of the great barrel lay sharp upon the sand. Her foot struck a bit of rock and she stumbled. At the sound a figure appeared at the edge of the shadow blot, and she pressed herself close to one of the tank's slim legs.

The face of the man as he peered into the darkness whence the sound had come was clearly revealed to her.

Tightening her grip upon the gun in her bosom she stepped boldly forth into the starlight.

"Good God! Sadie Morrison!"

Sadie

She saw his wide, staring eyes, and his flexed jaw, as he clutched the leg of the tank for support.

"Yes"—her voice was icy cold—"it's Sadie Morrison."

She took a step nearer. The man swallowed dryly—she saw the movement of his throat above the loose collar of his flannel shirt—and started to speak, but she cut him short:

"What you doing out here—Jim Lacy?"

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE WATER TANK

IN the æon that elapsed before either spoke again, there appeared to Sadie a vision. . . .

It was Sunday afternoon in Chelsea Park, and the band was playing in the Chinese Pavilion. The hard-trod paths, edged with white stones and cracked by the intense heat of that summer, glowed in the yellow sunlight. Sadie, standing by the platform of the scenic railway, in her blue organdie, with nodding pink roses on her hat, was very hot.

Grace and Frances had promised to meet her here, by the garish, little Japanese ticket office wherein, at the moment, sat a sweltering girl in a scarlet gown, with a scarlet mortarboard perched rakishly atop her yellow pompadour.

It was the biggest day of the season thus far. The tenements and cheap apartment houses of a vast area of which the Park was the center had been drained by the three converging car lines, and every pathway was thronged with a gayly riotous mob whose members strenuously sought to obtain a meed of pleasure in the mishaps of their neighbors. Laughter was the keynote of the moment, rising above even the rattle and clang of the

scenic, the drone of the merry-go-rounds, and the insistent *click* of the turnstiles at the main entrance.

Sadie bent her head and read, upside down, the face of the little blue enameled watch, hanging from its glittering rhinestone bar upon her bosom. It was already half an hour past the appointed time of meeting. Sadie fanned herself vigorously with the palm-leaf fan a boy at the gate insisted that she should buy. It had only cost a nickel and would be a good thing to have lots of times. At one side of the little ticket booth she hesitated a moment as if in doubt, then untied the corner of her moist handkerchief. The surging crowd and the reeking man in the blue cap and rumpled uniform did the rest. Almost before she realized it had occurred she was in one of the cars, and seating herself beside a man whom she had never seen before. The perspiring official in the rumpled uniform cried, "Let'er go," and the car began the ascent to the first tower.

In any event the ride would serve to cool her off. She pushed back her pompadour and drew the neck of her open-work waist away from her hot throat. The man beside her said something, but she made no reply. Then the car shot forward. It was not her first experience of the scenic; long since had the original thrill, accompaniment to a flight down the steep declivity, been lost to her. But to-day it was different. The overpowering heat, the relentless glare of the sun, the sickening motion, and the deafening clamor, all combined to destroy the equilibrium that heretofore she had never found it difficult to maintain on the device. She became keenly con-

At the Water Tank

scious that she was growing light-headed. She had never fainted in her life, but instinctively she realized that she was fainting now. A car, on the return, shot past them. The man at her side waved his hand and shouted, after the approved fashion of scenic railway travelers. Then she clutched his arm.

"I—I—I'm going to faint," she managed to mutter; and as consciousness lapsed and she became enveloped in a black lassitude, her last impression was of the clasp of his arm about her and the feel of his shoulder against her cheek. . . .

When next she opened her eyes she was sitting on a bench by the platform, and before her hovered a root-beer boy staring with round, marble eyes into her face.

"Here, take this," she heard a voice say. "Drink it. It will make you feel better."

She took the proffered mug and drank greedily. The man paid the boy and he moved slowly away, glancing back over his shoulder as he did so.

"What happened?" Sadie asked, then, looking up.

The man was smiling. She could afford to smile, now, too.

"Sorter passed away, I guess," he said.

"Did I really faint?"

"Kind o' looked like it."

"Now wouldn't that jar you?" she murmured; adding: "I'm much obliged to you, though. I didn't know I was such a fool."

"I guess it was the heat," he speculated.

"I guess so," she agreed. "I never fainted before

in my life. It ain't like what I thought it was at all. I thought it made you sick and all that. It don't, though; not a bit. When I felt myself going I didn't seem to care a snap. You feel just grand—so sorter peaceful, and sleepy, and—and *soft*."

"They say you feel that way when you're drowning," he observed. "I had a friend once that went down four times, and when they got him out and he come to, so's he could talk, he was sore. On the square, he was—*sore*. Said he'd never felt so fine in his life as when he went down the last time. According to him all that stuff we read about how when you're drowning everything you've ever done, or that's ever happened to you, flashes over you, is a lot of rot."

"I guess, though, I'd rather faint than drown," said Sadie, seriously. "You can feel like that a lot of times if you only faint, but you can't drown but once."

"That's so," the man agreed.

Then he asked her if she felt able to walk over to the Casino. "Mebbe you'd like a glass of lemonade, or something," he suggested.

She was quite passive and rose unsteadily. As they walked on down the crowded main thoroughfare, she told him how it chanced that she was in the Park alone.

"Maybe we'll run across Grace and Frances somewhere," she said.

For a long time they sat facing each other at a little table on the roof of the Casino porch, where, as Sadie had said, "you can see better." Frankly she told him who she was and he replied:

At the Water Tank

"Guess I'll have to feed down to Kelsey's, noons, after this."

"Better had," she urged, smiling.

"But I ain't in town all the time, you know," he went on. "I travel for a St. Louis shoe house."

"Oh, do you?" Sadie exclaimed. "Lots of traveling men come to Kelsey's. It's so near the depot." . . .

Later, he took her home, and the next day . . . and the next . . . and the next . . . he saw her at the restaurant. . . .

Every little detail of their meetings thereafter flooded her memory now—all that she had tried to forget in the months that had elapsed since their last brief encounter, under the electric light in front of Frieberg's cut-rate ticket office, back—away back—in Kansas City.

The cold starlight cut her lithe figure clean against the sand. Her numb fingers curled tighter around the grip of the gun in her bosom.

"What are you doin' out here?"

Lacy shrugged his shoulders. That and his silence goaded her to frenzy.

"Damn you, Jim Lacy," she snarled, as the gun leaped into view, "the last time I saw you I told you if you ever came around where I was again, I'd kill you—and now I'm going to do it!"

He sprang toward her with a little cry, only to meet the muzzle of the weapon presented squarely to his face, and shrank back.

Sadie

"I didn't know you were out here," he pleaded. "Honest to God I didn't, Sadie!"

"You lie!" she challenged. "You know you lie! What are you here for, if it ain't because they told you I was here? Listen to me, Jim Lacy. Bagdad ain't big enough for you and me. This whole desert ain't big enough. There's just two ways for you to leave this place—in the baggage car, layin' down, or in the chair car, sittin' up. There's only one of us goin' to stay on, and that's me!"

"You wouldn't"—the words came in an awed whisper—"you—wouldn't—really—kill—me—would—you—Sadie?"

She saw how his hand trembled as he raised it to his forehead to wipe away the sweat, and she moved closer to him, so close that she could feel his breath on her face.

"Jim Lacy, listen here." Each word cut like a knife. "Out in this country there's a lot of snakes. Nearly every scrub oak and *mesquite* bush from here to the Pan-handle's got one under it; but every time our people see one they kill it, so maybe in a thousand years there won't be any more. Snakes are just made to be killed, and that's why I'd kill you as quick as I would one of them. For that's all you are, Jim Lacy, just a snake!"

Involuntarily he shrank from her.

"As for what might happen to me if I did," she went on hopelessly, "I don't care." She hesitated. He could not wrench his eyes from her face.

At the Water Tank

"Shall I do it? Shall I? Or are you goin' to go?"

He realized the finality of the question, and standing there, shriveled by the fire of her words, the instant, to him, was like the instant before the springing of a trap. Hers then was the spirit of the desert about them, the desert which had made her a part of itself. No less cruel was it, no less a menace to the shrinking creature before her. An instant he hesitated, then, loosening his grip upon the tank's attenuated leg, he covered his face with his hands and sank, sobbing, upon his knees.

"I never meant to do you any harm, Sadie—never!" fell haltingly from his lips.

"It ain't what you did to me, or what you didn't do, that matters," was her unrelenting answer. "It's what you did to *her*—the woman you gave your name to. Poor little, frail thing—you never knew it—but I saw her once—after I found out. It's what you did to *her*—the mother of your little boy. If he's looking down at you now, what do you suppose *he* thinks—that little boy—up there?" With the gun she pointed to the velvet, star-pierced sky.

"Sadie, for God's sake"—and he reached out blindly to clutch her skirt.

"God's got a heap of use for you," she sneered. "Maybe if I hadn't found out when I did I'd 'a' had a finish like a lot of other girls back there in Kansas City. It ain't the finish I'd 'a' had, though, that'd 'a' mattered, but the one she'd 'a' had when she found out how you'd been stringin' me, and makin' me promise I'd marry you in a year—and she alive, and never knowing but what

you were on the square—and dreaming about that little boy——”

“In God’s name, Sadie,” he whispered raucously, “do it if you’re goin’ to! Do it now! I’ve come as far as I could. I can’t get any farther”—his voice broke. “All I’ve got on earth’s two dollars. That won’t take you far, out here.” He looked up at her then, and she read the utter hopelessness in his eyes. “It don’t make any difference, after all. If you don’t do it, the others will. It’s you, Sadie, or the law!”

Crouching over him, “What do you mean?” she demanded.

“I mean”—he faltered, and the rest came with physical effort—“I’ve done what you were going to do—murder.”

“Murder!”

Slowly, all that this confession meant dawned upon her.

“Jim Lacy!” she murmured, “Jim Lacy!”

Lifting his eyes they saw the horror in her own.

“No! No!” he cried, clutching her skirt, “not that! Oh, not that! She died, Sadie—she died six months ago. She never knew. She’s gone, Sadie—gone to join him.” Then his eyes fell as he ran on heedlessly. “It was because I knew she must die that I lied to you, Sadie. Only because I knew.” She pulled away as if his touch were contaminating. “You’ll never understand, Sadie; but, oh, I loved you so, girl! You came to me when everything was black and your love seemed to promise me all that I was hungry for and couldn’t have.

At the Water Tank

The thought of losing you nearly drove me crazy. I didn't tell you about her 'cause I thought we could go on for a year as we had—until it was all over with her—for God's sake, don't look at me like that! Don't look at me like that!——”

She turned away, one hand clutching her breast.

“No matter what had 'a' happened, I'd never have done you dirt. I couldn't, girl, I loved you so——”

Dazedly she brushed her hand across her eyes. Valiantly she strove to beat back the passion consuming her as once she had before. Unsteadily, Lacy rose and came toward her. The gun had slipped from her nerveless fingers and lay forgotten in the sand at her feet. She did not draw back when he laid his hand upon her arm, only turned and gazed blankly into his pleading eyes.

“Listen, Sadie,” he went on, more calmly now. “A little while after you left, Jennie began to get worse. I'd known for a long time that there was no hope for her. She wasn't ever real well after little Frank was born. Then, six months ago, she died—and that was the end of me. What was there left? I got so I didn't care. I'd lost you, and I'd lost him, and I'd lost her. I was always kind to her and sometimes I've thought if she'd 'a' known she'd 'a' been glad. She was that sort. And all she talked and worried about when she knew she couldn't get well was what would happen to me—afterwards. Once I came near telling her about you—but something held me back. So she never knew—and died—worrying. Then everything went to hell—everything.

My work got rotten. I didn't care. The house stood it as long as they could, then let me out. Maybe I could 'a' got another job, but I didn't want one. What was the use anyway? I put all the money together I could rake and scrape and came out here—Nevada. The papers back East were full of the gold strike up there, and I thought—mebbe—there'd be a chance for me. But most of all I wanted to get away—somewhere where things were different, where every corner and every street car wouldn't remind me of what I'd got to forget. I put all my money in a mining game, up there, and lost it in two months. Then I hit the trail for the hills. I fell in with a fellow who was out here for the gold—same as I was—and we went up to Leaders together. It's in the hills—the newest camp. A week ago to-night he and I had a row. It was over a rotten game of cribbage. He said I cheated. I saw red, Sadie. We were all alone. I shot twice. He fell on his face, and never spoke another word. I couldn't realize what I'd done. I got down on my knees and turned him over, and there, right in the middle of his forehead, was a spot of blood. Then I knew I'd killed him. I had to get away. I only had a few dollars, and he had a few. I took his and mine—managed to reach Tonapah. Then I came down here. Maybe they've not found him yet—but when they—do—Sadie"—his whole body trembled.

"They'll hang me," he whispered.

"Jim!"

She seized his cold hands in both hers.

"So you see," he went on, with a little shrug of the

At the Water Tank

shoulders—"it don't make any difference which does it—you—or they——"

But she did not seem to hear the last, and when she spoke, the words came in a swift torrent, half frantically.

"Jim, Jim, you've got to get away—maybe they'll be here to-morrow—maybe they're here now—to-night. Listen—O God, the money—the money—the money!" With her clenched fist she smote her hip. "I've only got ten dollars—my mother died, Jim—my poor old mother. I sent so much to the Sisters—I can't borrow—maybe Fernandez"—suddenly she stopped, breathless, and into her eyes came a new and different light, and without warning she laughed—a high-pitched, hysterical laugh. "I know," she cried. "Jim—Jim—do as I say. Stay in your room to-morrow—alone—I'll get you the ten dollars—to-morrow's the day they pay off at the works—town'll be full to-morrow night—Jim, listen, you must be at the 'Monte'—Fernandez's place—at half past nine. That'll give you time to catch Number 7 for the Coast at ten. And, Jim, no matter what happens, no matter what you see—play the wheel. Do you hear—play the wheel—this combination"—her lips close to his ear she whispered the numbers—"Do you understand? I know you can't see through the plan—but, Jim, for God's sake, do as I tell you. Play the wheel—that way—no matter what happens. Now stay here till I get back to the eating house. Don't look at me—don't notice me." Her face was close to his. "Don't be afraid," she ran on. "Don't be afraid. They're not going to get you. To-morrow night at this time you'll be on your way to the

Sadie

Coast—you'll get the money, Jim—for we're going to bust the bank at the 'Monte'!"

Without giving him a chance to question her she sprang away and he saw her fleeting figure in the starlight, down the tracks. And when the shadow of the station hid her he followed, slowly, to vanish as she had vanished.

The pale luster of the night trembled on the sand. Away off in the distance a coyote wailed, and around the end of the pile of ties behind the water tank came a frail, hesitating figure, to be revealed, presently, clear and distinct in the silver starlight. The glitter of an object, half buried in the sand, attracted his glowing eyes. Stooping he recovered it, murmuring: "She even forgot Billy's present." He blew the dust from the cylinder and wiped it carefully on his sleeve. Then holding it on a level with his eyes so that the starlight twinkled opalescently on the pearl grip: "She didn't need you to-night, after all, did she?" he said, adding, as if the one thought followed logically the other: "Oh, Sadie, Sadie, what is it makes us love you so?"

But the desert night about him held no answer.

CHAPTER XX

THE "MONTE"

BILLY THOMPSON'S resignation from the System was regretfully received in Kansas City, and Stevens, as he read it, decided that it might, perhaps, be well to "run out" to Bagdad and look the ground over before appointing a permanent successor. The letter was characteristically to the point, and left no doubt of the finality of the writer's decision. Though he noted this, Stevens smiled, nevertheless, as he read it.

"It ain't all of a sudden"—so the letter ran—"for I've been giving it a lot of thought. While nobody knows better than I do that Billy Thompson, maybe, couldn't make a glittering success of the St. Regis, or any other caravanserie of civilization, he has got the right dope on this country and knows how to pass out three-weeks-old canned-fruit pie-cuts and get away with it on the strength of fresh fillings. Also I ain't as young as I used to be. If I stayed on, some day you'd send a rah-rah boy out here to take my job, then it would be me for the faro box. Nix for mine, Stevie! Al Tunison has recognized my ability with the nude eye, and the share in the business that he offers makes the temptation of St. Anthony look like a ham omelet to a man with dyspepsia. I know you'll understand. Better come out

yourself. And by the way, Miss Morrison's going with me as housekeeper. Regards to the boys." . . .

Stevens was folding the letter as Hutchinson entered his office.

Hutchinson was freckled and fat and red-headed; the tip of a blue penholder projected over his ear in the usual way and in one hand he clutched a roll of typed "flimsy." It may be recalled that on that momentous afternoon when Sadie first sought out the superintendent of the Carter System in his little room overlooking the network of tracks in the "yards" below, she had asked direction from a red-headed youth she chanced to meet in the corridor. That was Hutchinson.

"How's tricks?" he inquired, leaning over the superintendent's desk.

"Billy Thompson's going to blow the works out'n Bagdad," was the reply.

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed Hutch, as he was familiarly called in the offices. "What's the row?"

Stevens told him, adding casually: "Remember that girl I sent out there?"

"That nectarine with the gold in her teeth?"

The superintendent nodded, somewhat wearily, perhaps.

"Well?"

"She's got Billy jumping through fried cakes, just like I told you she would. Looks like she was It."

"You don't say! Now what do you think of that!" was all Hutch found it possible, on the moment, to observe by way of comment.

The "Monte"

Stevens's face suddenly lighted.

"Say," he exclaimed, "how'd you like to take a hike out there in a couple of weeks, just to look the ground over? I haven't got anybody I can send right off the bat. I ought to have, though, for I've been expecting something of the kind for the last six months, from the tone of Billy's letters. Maybe you'd have to stop on a while and run things. Go?"

"Sure, if you want me to." There was, however, a lack of eagerness in Hutch's assurance.

"All right, I'll take it up with the old man this afternoon."

Stevens appeared greatly relieved.

At the door Hutchinson turned.

"Say," he said, "don't give him the notion I *want* to go. If you do he'll let it stand for a vacation and'll euchre me out of Topeka. I've been planning to put in a couple of weeks over there in August."

This with an illuminating wink.

"So you've got it, too, have you?" Stevens inquired, with no effort to conceal his disgust.

"Some," was the terse acknowledgment as the door closed upon Hutch's squat figure.

Thereupon Stevens wrote Thompson a letter in long hand, an honor rarely conferred by him upon any of the System's numerous local managers, in which he expressed his own regret to lose so excellent a lieutenant, at the same time congratulating him upon what might, after all, prove to be his good luck. It was this letter that Sansome handed Billy as the latter strolled into the Always

Open after supper on the evening with which this chapter is concerned.

To him the day had been prosaically stupid ; stupid in the precise degree that to an Eastern story writer in search of colourous copy it would have been wildly exciting. It was such another day as Bagdad had experienced, monthly, since the founding of the town seven years before.

Properly, it had begun at dawn when a leathery faced borax miner, in a moment of exuberant anticipation, fell afoul of a sheep herder from "over East." That the herder should subsequently have been gathered to the flock, so far as further participation in the multitudinous glories of the day was concerned, and for eight hours had lain in a trance-like state in the dark and hellishly hot "back room" of The Golden Fleece, at the end of Main Street, was a matter of slight moment, particularly to the sheepman. And that his valorous conqueror had forthwith deemed it his religious duty to shoot up the town, until shorn of his guns by a little fellow in corduroy pants, a blue shirt, and a deputy sheriff's badge glittering on his single striped suspender, was likewise an incident of trifling importance.

By ten o'clock Main Street for its entire length was fringed with ponies, dependent of head and tail, dozing in the sun. Every cowboy, miner, Chinaman, negro, borax digger, mule driver, and painted lady whose varying fields of effort lay within forty miles of town was in that lurid thoroughfare, or the various places of relaxation and refreshment giving from it. Moreover, as

The "Monte"

it chanced to be the *fiesta* of St. Francis of blessed memory, there was present a generous sprinkling of gaudy Mexicans and glowering greasers, all of whom were more or less bubbling with a chemical combination of *aguiendente*, mescal, and garlic, to the greater glory of their God!

At high noon, beneath a sun that poured a molten flood of yellow upon the blistering sand of Main Street, had occurred a pony race between four Navajo Indians, one of them, it may be said in passing, he whom Sadie had rescued from the mob of children on the day of her arrival in Bagdad. The prize—a dollar bottle of Mulvaney's Stomach Bitters (not a beverage but a medicine)—had been bestowed with becoming ceremony upon a tall, lithe buck, much to his gratification and the chagrin of the other contestants as evidenced by the glances of devouring envy cast by them upon him where he lay prone upon a bed of old salmon tins and breakfast-food boxes behind the Bon Marché, his glazed, unblinking eyes staring sightlessly at the gleaming sky. In order, however, that there may be no misapprehension on the part of any reader of this chronicle, it needs be said that the prize had not been obtained from Rowley's stock. In point of fact, since the night of his first call upon Sadie, Jerry had, in so far as within him lay, obeyed the laws and mandates of a wise, if oftentimes obtuse, paternal government in the matter of dispensing certain popular and generally effective remedial agents to the noble red man. As he perceived Sadie, the law's good angel, approaching the Bon Marché across Main Street, it was instinct only, and not

a guilty conscience, that prompted him to rush to where lay the snoring brave and hastily cover him with a burlap, at the same time declaring to the trio that stood by in silent contemplation of their dreaming brother, that if they "didn't git t' hell out o' here" he would give them something to carry back to their *hogans* that their squaws would have to dig out of them with case knives.

By midafternoon there were the usual number of drunks in the street, and the usual number of fights in progress at various points; notably, one in which a borax miner received a bullet in the thigh, a second in which a Mexican broke the blade of his knife against the rib of a compatriot during an argument over the too luxurious charms of a dusky border belle who stood at one side impatient to take to her capacious bosom him whose ribs should prove the harder; and a third on the floor of the Golden Fleece, in which a sheepman—with the eyes of a seer and a torso gritty with sand—fought it out with a cowboy, fist and fist, over a little gold and enamel pin bearing three Greek letters and a lamp of wisdom, which, by common knowledge, the puncher was known always to wear on the point of his shirt collar, and ever to defend with valor—and whatever else chanced to be at hand—when he was contemptuously referred to, in his own presence, as a "rah-rah boy."

In a word, thus far the day had in no way differed from all the pay days that had gone before, unless, perhaps, it had been a little quieter.

Late in the afternoon Billy Thompson sauntered over to McGregor's tent, immaculately clad in a new, light

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gray, Norfolk suit, the coat of which was buttoned only at the waist over his ox-blood shirt, in order, should occasion and circumstance demand, he might readily "draw" from the Mexican shoulder holster under his left arm.

Oblivious to the clamor in the street, Skinny had slept all the afternoon and it was Billy's step on the creaky flooring at the entrance of the tent that awakened him now. Laboriously he raised his shrunken body to a sitting posture and rubbed his eyes.

"Well," he yawned, stretching like a cat from his toes to the tips of his fingers, "what's happened; anything?"

Insufferably bored, Thompson shook his head and seated himself on a canvas camp stool.

"What I can't figure out," Skinny complained, "is why when they hook in their *mazuma* they don't get drunk and stay drunk—decent; instead of trying to see who can raise the most dust."

Billy sighed. "The Lord knows," he declared, "and He won't tell."

Presently he inquired casually:

"Sadie been over to-day?"

"A little while this morning," McGregor told him. "She brought me some fried cakes. That guy's still at the eatin' house, is he?"

His eyes narrowed. Did Billy know what he knew? Skinny asked himself.

"Says he's goin' to-night," was the reply, and Skinny drew a breath of relief.

Sadie

Until almost morning, in the stillness, he had lain awake, thinking things over, as he expressed it, and at last, almost as if in a dream, there had been presented to his troubled mind a way whereby he might help. But Billy must not know; Billy must never know.

"Say," he exclaimed, after a moment, "I'm gettin' sick of this place even if the railroad *is* comin' and the Palace *is* pretty near done, and I've just about made up my mind to pull freight."

Billy looked up. How many times had he heard Skinny say that? He was more keenly sensible of the pathos enveloping the little figure there on the edge of the cot, that moment, than ever before. You *are* going to pull freight, little chap, he thought—and soon. I wonder if you know where your next camp'll be. You've played the game to the limit and you've played it on the level, but the cards have been stacked against you, and Fate has worked a holdout. She's skinned you, but nobody could win in a crooked game like that, could they?

"Oh, I wouldn't go if I was you, Skinny. Maybe something will turn up; can't always tell," he said.

McGregor was rolling a cigarette, rolling it with great pains. As he moistened the paper he said, with a smile:

"Billy, why don't you marry Sadie, and get it over?"

Thompson grinned and shifted his position.

"That's about the tenth time you've asked me that," he replied, "and I've told you before, it ain't up to me. She just can't see it, that's all. Skinny"—a serious look came into his eyes as, leaning forward, he went quietly

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on—"she thought a heap of some fellow—once." McGregor's eyes narrowed again. "She as much as told me so, coming back from that dance we went to down't San Luis. It was on account of him—a guy in Kansas City—that she hit Bagdad in the first place. I got that all right. And lately she's asked a lot of questions about Curly Watrous——"

"Curly Watrous!" McGregor interrupted blankly.

Billy nodded. "That same night—comin' back," he went on. "He was there and she saw him. And afterwards she asked Jerry Rowley a lot about him, too. Jerry told me. She had *him* goin' but he didn't let on. 'Course I passed it off, but"—he hesitated—"Skinny, do you s'pose she ever knew Curly before? Do you s'pose he was the guy?"

"Did he come from K. C.?" McGregor's brow lifted inquiringly.

"Don't anybody seem to know, b'rights."

"She never mentioned him to me," declared Skinny.

He had let his cigarette go out. This new turn puzzled him. With almost phonographic accuracy he recalled every word that he had heard pass between Sadie and Lacy at the tank, but nothing either had said served to cast a ray of light upon this new phase affairs were showing.

"Either she *did* know him—back there," Thompson ran on, "or else she's just interested in him all of a sudden, like I guess girls are, sometimes."

"Why don't you ask her?"

Billy shrugged his shoulders and rose, smiling.

"There's some things, Skinny," was his slow reply, "that you can't ask a girl—like Sadie. That's one of 'em."

"Mebbe that's so," McGregor thoughtfully agreed.

And as if by mutual consent the subject was straight-way dropped.

"I s'pose there'll be the usual time to-night," Skinny speculated.

"Comin' out to lend a hand?" Thompson inquired.

"'Fraid my sportin' days are over, Jessie dear," was the ironical reply, "unless"—he caught himself. "Guess not," he concluded lamely.

But Billy Thompson had barely reached the other side of Main Street before the little gambler, first hooking the flaps of his tent, proceeded to change his shirt and otherwise prepare himself for the adventure that lay before him. And as he moved about, stopping now and then to cough, he whistled and hummed alternately a plaintive little melody that his mother had taught him and memory of which, like a faint echo of the long ago, had come to him that morning, quite suddenly, as he lay dozing on the cot.

What if Billy Thompson *were* sick at heart? What if Lacy *were* shrinking from imagined dangers in his little bare room at the eating house? What if Curly Watrous, a man from nowhere, *had* become a factor in the little life problem of which Chance had given him the key? What of all this in the face of the fact that to-night he was going to do something that for two years he had dreamed of one day doing? He was going to help

The "Monte"

Sadie. And even the thought which kept crowding into his calculations that she was no doubt at this very moment alone in her room praying God to send her that assistance she could not foresee was coming—even this thought was rendered less disturbing to the little fellow's childishly simple mind, by the presence of the greater thought that he—he, at last—was going to help!

It was night, and Bagdad had caught its second wind. Every establishment in Main Street was alight. In the Bon Marché Rowley and his two helpers were busier than they had been on any night since the proprietor's return from the North. A dozen prospecting outfits were purchasing equipment, and in front of the store three Mexicans kept together a number of burros patiently awaiting their packs. Sansome, too, in the Always Open Drug Store was packing medicine kits and talking to half a dozen grizzled miners at once, all of whom were eager to take the trail in order that the greatest possible breadth of sand might be put between themselves and Bagdad before sunrise. The air was clamorous. Through the open doors of the saloons floated out the varied sounds of human revelry. Somewhere a concertina whined, its strains now and then blending in a singularly harmonious effect with those of a distant B-flat cornet. Down the street came a line of blanketed Indians, who, as they walked, glanced neither to right nor left. A huge miner, agreeably drunk, took up a position in front of the Golden Fleece and leaning against a hitch-post sighed soulfully through a Jew's-harp. In the

shadow at the end of the Bon Marché another Indian leaned against the wall and growled a love song of his people. Chinamen, their immobile faces gleaming as they crossed the paths of light, jostled glowering greasers, their features more than half hidden by the dipping brims of their peaked sombreros; borax miners, the skin of whose faces reminded one of old tan shoes, elbowed their red-eyed brothers of the placer pans; and cowpunchers in holiday regalia of recently combed angora chaps, gaudy 'kerchiefs and carved-leather cuffs, sneered in passing at the ragged, shrinking sheepmen from the hill country to the east. And above all other sounds rose the tinkle of glass on glass and the whirl and rattle of the roulette wheels as the little ivory balls leaped the metal hurdles in their pits.

As always, the crowd was greatest in the "Monte." Behind the long bar, Fernandez and two "extras," their coats off and their shirt sleeves rolled to their elbows, struggled to serve the row of clamorous customers that faced them. The necks of a score of squat black bottles clinked against the rims of twice as many glasses as unsteady hands were laid upon them. The oboe note in this symphony was afforded by the whirl of the slot machines. Now and again the coins would jangle in a gusty down-pour into the cups, and the lucky man would curse softly to himself as he scooped them up.

At one end of the faro table down the room, his back to the wall, sat a Chinaman chewing a root of licorice and fingering his chips as he watched, uttering no sound. Opposite him lolled a giant negro borax digger, coatless,

The "Monte"

his blue-flannel shirt, open almost to the waist, revealing his astonishing breast which gleamed like burnished ebony in the yellow rays of the huge, metal oil lamp dependant from the ceiling. On either side of the case-keeper—a blue-eyed youth in laced boots and stained khaki breeches—sat silently a little row of players, each intent upon his own markers save when now and then they glanced at the frame in front of the blue-eyed boy on which he shifted the little beads as card after card was drawn from the metal box by the man opposite, who with a face like a priest, save for the cold cigar between his teeth, dealt the game as if he were offering silent prayer. Behind, on his bootblack's throne, perched the lookout, guardian angel of the sport, a little man with a thin and drooping mustache and eyes that glittered in the lamplight like tiny turquoise beads.

At the end of the bar two stud-poker games were in progress, and near the door, his back to the wall, stood the man from San Luis, Skinny's successor at the wheel.

They were shuffling the cards at the stud-poker table, the faro dealer's box was empty, and the little ball had jiggled into a cup at the pit of the whirling saucer, when, amid the angry curses of those who had guessed wrong and the gentler curses of those who had guessed right, Lacy entered and deposited his case at the end of the bar at the same instant that McGregor pushed his way through the crowd from the rear.

The latter was dressed in the clothes that for four years he had feelingly referred to as his "glad rags." His tan shoes were woefully "run over," his gray

breeches, from long concealment at the bottom of his trunk, were wrinkled and creased, as was his baggy, bob-tailed coat. His derby hat was of an ancient block and his calico shirt was covered with little pink jockey caps and horseshoes pierced with whips. Over his breast floated a pale blue scarf, the knot more than half hidden by a gigantic opal pin.

On either cheek there burned a splotch of carmine and his eyes glowed like embers. More than half drunk with the excitement of the moment, combined with the whisky upon which he was now living, he staggered and waved his arms.

Behind the bar Fernandez saw him and shouted a warning.

The little gambler's lips curled in a sneer.

"Aw, close yer trap!" he cried, "it's my game t'-night!"

With his eyes glinting sparks the Mexican sprang around the end of the bar and seized him by one arm.

"You crazee!" he cried, but McGregor jerked away.

"Tell that mutt to pull freight!" he ordered.

"You' drunk!" Fernandez piped.

"What th' hell's that to you?" he screamed. "Leave it to the boys then!" He waved his arms aloft and yelled: "Boys! Listen! Boys!"

At the shrill command every drinker at the bar turned, and the players at the faro and poker tables forgot even their markers. In the excitement the placid Chinaman, unobserved by the lookout and the craning dealer, coppered four. Every eye in the room was turned upon the

The "Monte"

gaudy little figure by the door, and a silence, breathless with suspense, fell upon the throng. It was as if every man in the room felt the moment to be fraught with drama. Then, as the words came, hands that instinctively had gone to hips, froze there, rigid.

"Boys"—the burning eyes swept the close crescent of faces in front of him—"Boys, I quit workin' for the 'Monte' the other day 'cause—'cause I'm goin' t' die." He paused. "You all know me—I'm Skinny McGregor—I've taken your money—I've paid you money—and I want to do it—jus' once more"—A spasm of coughing seized him that racked his little body from his feet to his head. "I never thought I'd work that old wheel again," the voice went on raspingly, "but I want to—boys—jus' once—t'night. Tell José you want me to, won't you, boys?" he pleaded. "Jus' this once? Tonight! Only once more—'n' then I'll lay down——"

He held out his hands, tottered, and would have fallen, had not Fernandez caught him.

Ensued an instant of ominous stillness, and then, at the back of the crowd, some one cried, "Let him take the wheel!"

The command was taken up by another and another, until the long, low-ceiled room rang with it: "Give him the wheel!" "Let 'im have it!" "What's the matter wi' Skinny!" "Make 'way fer th' kid!"

In the face of all this Fernandez dared not refuse. He grinned, shrugged his shoulders and elbowed away. The man from San Luis sourly withdrew.

McGregor staggered forward. Behind the wheel, at

Sadie

his old station once more, he turned and smiled into the rough faces before him and they smiled back. Caressingly he ran his fingers over the rim of the device, then, with one hand clutching his breast, the old warning leaped from his lips:

"Come on, gents! She's going to roll! Make your bets! Money down, gents, and hands up! She rolls!"

Every other game in the room was deserted. Even the lookout, his eagle services no longer required, dropped from his perch. Only the master of the little metal box remained unmoved, and, laying aside his cold cigar proceeded to shuffle the deck for a game of seven-card solitaire. Every other man in the crowd, even the drinkers at the bar, had pressed about the wheel until Lacy, in the foremost row, was compelled to brace himself to keep from being borne headlong across the board.

"Again she rolls, gents!" piped the shrill staccato of the little figure leaning against the wall. "Make your bets! Money down, gents, and hands up! She rolls!"

At that instant Sadie appeared in the doorway.

Through the angle of the big negro's crooked arm Skinny saw her, and for her sole benefit he cried, his voice clear above the whirl of the spinning wheel:

"It's only to-night, gents! Jus' t'night! The last time!" The ball rattled into a cup. "Double O wins. Double O she is. The house cops the coin, gents!"

Scarcely conscious that she breathed, Sadie pressed forward. The big negro felt a hand on his arm and, looking down into her face, grinned and moved his huge bulk to one side that she might have room. She saw

The "Monte"

Lacy. An instant their eyes met and only Skinny McGregor perceived the flash that passed between them. Then the thin voice rose again shriller than before:

"She's goin' to roll, gents! Make your bets! Money down and hands up! She rolls!"

Lacy had played for the first time.

Sadie held her breath. And yet, she told herself, it was just as well perhaps. She would claim her privilege of spinning the wheel after he had lost the first whirl. Under her eyes the device was merely three, thin, horizontal stripes of color, above which McGregor bent, his hands resting lightly on the stationary rim. Slower and slower became the revolutions of the delicately balanced saucer, more and more distinct grew the stripes. Over the metal hurdles bounded the little sphere, then settled into a cup and nestled there.

"Red wins, gents!" she heard a voice cry—a voice that sounded a long way off—"seventeen on the red!"

Lacy had won and she had seen the trick. The wheel was spinning again and Lacy had played a second time. She saw the faces about her as in a mist. Again the little ball nestled in the cup at the bottom of the wheel.

"Again the red wins!" McGregor cried; "seventeen on the red a second time——"

She saw Lacy receive the redeemable chips in his hands—and nothing else. Her appearance in the "Monte" had occasioned no surprise, nor did her withdrawal. Once outside it seemed to her that more strength than she now possessed would be required to cross Main Street. In the shadow of the new Palace's porch she sank upon her

Sadie

knees and, covering her face with her hands, fell to sobbing. What did it all mean? It couldn't be luck, just blind luck—for she had seen with her own eyes—with her own eyes she had seen Skinny spring the wheel!

Off in the east Number 8 whistled. She rose, and as she did so a figure, carrying a case, ran past her.

Leaning forward: "Jim!" she called low, "Jim!"

Lacy stopped and looked about him.

"Here," she called again, and in the shadow of the porch he joined her.

"You must hurry, Jim," she ran on. "There's a transport sailing from 'Frisco on Thursday for the Philippines—I read about it in the paper—take it—enlist, Jim—if they'll let you—anything—for God's sake—no, keep the money—I can't kiss you, Jim—go—Jim—go—there's the train—go!"

He ran then, out of the shadow, into the half light of the street, and until the long overland train pulled out, the curtained windows of the Pullmans reflecting the twinkling lights of Main Street, she stood there, leaning against a pillar of the porch, wondering.

It was all like a dream, as unreasonable and as detached. Lacy had come—and gone. It was if he had not come at all. Even his confession—the confession he had made under the stars, to her, alone—was unreal. Everything was unreal, as unreal as the desert out yonder. And yet—McGregor—

Slowly she picked her way across Main Street. *Was* it all over? What, then, of McGregor? What did he know?

The "Monte"

Through the open door of the eating house, as she approached, she saw Billy. He sat with his chair tilted back against the wall and his feet on the cleared table, reading. Sadie stopped, and smiled. How good to her Billy had been—how good. Her breath caught in her throat. Billy must never know. Dear, dear Billy!

In the stillness she heard a light footfall on the cinders, and turned. Around the end of the station staggered Skinny McGregor, who, as he perceived her, came hurrying forward, his arms outheld.

"Sadie! Sadie!" he gasped, and collapsed at her feet. And even in the deep shadow that enveloped them she saw that the whole front of his jockey shirt was crimson stained.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PASSING OF SKINNY

THE others had gone; Sadie was alone with Skinny in the tent. He lay on the cot as he had lain all day. Beside him, on a little packing box, were the dishes Mrs. Fernandez had brought over in the mid-afternoon. Presently it would be necessary to light the lantern; even now the night breeze was rising, stirring the flaps at the entrance.

Sadie drew the steamer chair nearer the cot.

"Don't you s'pose maybe you'd sleep a little if I should go out and leave you alone?" she asked.

A faint smile flickered into his eyes and curled the corners of his thin lips as he moved his head from side to side on the pillow.

"All right," she said, "I'll stay, then."

Till now she had not been alone with him since last night. All day his simple wants had been ministered to by Billy Thompson and Rowley, while Sansome, who possessed a certain crude knowledge of the requirements in such cases, had acted as physician in charge. Twice Sadie had been on the verge of speaking of the part the little gambler had played in the episode of last night, but had restrained herself. If Skinny had acted voluntarily she felt sure he would tell her; if he had not, then the

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whole thing had been but a whim of Chance, that enmeshing Chance in whose coils she had struggled all her life.

"Shall I light the lantern?" she presently asked. Night was gathering round; the corners of the tent, even now, were in shadow.

"No," he whispered, "there'll be—time enough for that."

She inclined her head.

"There's somethin', Sadie," he went on after a moment, "that I've been wantin' to tell you all day, but there ain't been a chance till now. It's 'bout last night. I was afraid you'd worry, an' you needn't."

"I just wondered—Skinny—that's all," she replied hesitatingly, with a little catch of her breath.

"You see I heard what you said to him—out there—by the tank—and what he said to you—and——"

"And so you did it all yourself instead of letting me," she murmured. That he *had* heard did not matter now. Sliding from the chair, she sank upon her knees and pressed her cheek against his cold hand.

"Dear—dear—Skinny," she whispered.

His eager ears caught the word and he raised himself on one elbow.

"You callin' me that—Sadie? Gawd!" he breathed reverently. "There ain't anybody ever called me that before in all my life!"

A little cooing sound issued from her throat as she replied:

"But you'll always be that to me—Skinny——"

Sadie

Her head was bowed so she could not see that he had closed his eyes, nor the smile that gave to his mouth so singular a sweetness.

"That's pay enough—more'n enough," he murmured.

A moment he hesitated, then went slowly on:

"For a long time I've been wantin' to do something for you—or Billy—or mos' anybody—just to show I wasn't a toad, layin' in the sun, after all; then you gimme the chance. Besides *you* wouldn't have skinned José——"

She raised her eyes at this and drew back wonderingly.

"It wouldn't have been right, you know," he continued. "It'd 'a' been like touchin' his till, behind the bar."

"O Skinny," she gasped fearfully, "I never thought of that!"

"Of course you didn't? Don't you s'pose I knew that?" He chuckled. "But that's what it would 'a' been—just the same—two hundred and thirty-five dollars——"

On his hand he felt the wet warmth of a tear.

"There, there," he ran on pitifully, "don't you worry 'bout it. It was all fixed—this afternoon——"

"What do you mean?" The question sprang unbidden from her lips.

"I fixed it—I gave it to José—don't you worry. What *would* I do with m' money? I can't take it with me, can I? Don't look at me so funny, Sadie—I've got some—it ain't taken all I could rake in to keep me—like this." With a wave of his hand he indicated his imme-

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diate environment. "I've salted all I could—over'n José's safe. I asked him to bring me the box—'n' I paid him. It don't make any difference what I tol' him. He thinks he understands. I just wanted you to know it was fixed, so's you wouldn't worry."

Sadie dared not let her eyes meet his just then, and rising, went to the entrance of the tent and stood there, silently looking out. What could she say? she asked herself; what could she do?

Presently she came back to where he lay watching her, and looking down into his glowing eyes, said:

"Skinny, you hadn't ought to have done it; you ought to have let me paddle my own canoe."

"That's all right," was his reply, "only you were getting into the rapids—and—if somebody hadn't helped you, maybe you'd 'a' upset."

In his heart he was abundantly glad that she had not thanked him. He had feared her thanks, little realizing that some subtle instinct had given her to feel how futile thanks would be—now.

"Dear—dear," she murmured softly.

Impulsively he raised himself, and catching her hand kissed it again and again.

"Sit down—won't you?" he pleaded. "I got the rest—here," he added as she dropped into the steamer chair beside him.

From under his pillow he drew out a narrow, flat package wrapped in the glaring comic supplement of an old newspaper. He sat up and with trembling fingers opened it. Sadie leaned forward.

Sadie

"That's m' Bible," the thin voice ran on. "'Member I told you m' mother gave it to me when I came out here—with Jim. See—that's where she wrote m' name—'Sam'—see?"

Sadie nodded.

"'N' here's m' money." From the long, unsealed envelope that had lain upon the Bible he drew out a thin pack of bills.

"Count 'em," he said, reaching out his hand. "I guess there's a hundred and twenty-one."

She was glad for the little task, glad for the opportunity to take her eyes from his.

"More'n that!" she cried quite gayly, when she had run them through. "There's a hundred and twenty-three."

"Is there?" His face lighted. "Good! Now listen, Sadie, and I'll tell you what I want you to do—if you will——"

He fell back upon the pillow again, clutching in one hand an unopened envelope that had formed part of his treasure.

"——When it's all over I want you to pay what it costs—out of that—there. You keep it—it won't cost much—there'll be some left. Get things just as cheap as you can—and—and I want you to keep the rest——"

"O Skinny—I can't," Sadie murmured brokenly.

"Yes you can," he insisted, "'cause there ain't anybody else to have it—you've got to—and whatever's left I want you to keep till you get married—don't look away like that—'cause you're goin' to be—some day. 'N' then

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I want you to get yourself something—something that won't get broken—nor wear out very quick—something you can keep a long, long time. Mebbe you'll put it on the what-not—everybody'll give you something—and when folks see it they'll say, 'Where'd you get that?' an' you'll say, 'That? Oh, Skinny McGregor gimme that for a wedding present'—Won't you do it, Sadie—please?"

Her gentle fingers brushed the hair back from his forehead.

"And I'll think more of it than all the rest put together," she promised brokenly.

In his eyes glowed the fires of his great love, nor had she the will then, nor, perhaps, even the desire to escape them.

"I'm goin' to ask you something—Sadie"—he went on, after a moment.

She leaned closer.

"If I was all right—if I wasn't all shot to pieces, but was *whole*—like—like Billy Thompson, say—and you knew me like you do—and I was just what I am—I mean workin' in the 'Monte' and all that—and should come to you—mebbe we'd be ridin' over there by the mesa—and I should tell you how much I love you—what would you say—Sadie? What would you say?"

He had raised himself again on one elbow. Sadie did not hesitate. Impulsively she dropped upon her knees, and slipping one arm under his neck, whispered:

"I'd be so glad, Skinny; oh, I'd be so glad!"

"Sadie," he murmured as he sank back, "Sadie!"

Sadie

The little envelope had fallen to the floor, and leaning forward she recovered it.

"What is it?" she asked.

He tore the flap and drawing out the contents held it up.

"See," he said.

It was a little scapular, frayed and stained.

Something clutched at the girl's heart as her eyes rested upon it, and reaching out she took it from him.

"Can you sit up again?" she asked, and with an effort he raised himself, facing her. His shirt, open at the throat, disclosed his thin and wasted neck. Leaning forward, an end of the woolen string in either hand, she met them behind and tied them there. Then she pressed one of the little pictured squares of cloth against his breast and over it buttoned the collar of his shirt. Their eyes met and each in the other's saw the Light that shines on land and sea. Then, involuntarily almost, it seemed, the thin hand lifted and upon his breast—as he had not done for years—he pointed the Symbol, and fell back upon his pillow with a sigh.

Sadie rose and lighted the lantern. As she set it among the dishes on the box at the head of the cot, she heard the crunch of a heel outside and turned as Rowley appeared between the flaps of the tent.

"Thought mebbe you was alone," he said.

"I was just going," Sadie replied, "just as you came." She looked down. "Is there anything else?" she asked. McGregor shook his head. Never could she forget his eyes as they looked up at her then. She let the tips of

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her fingers rest an instant on his forehead. "Good-night," she whispered, "good-night."

Ten minutes later as Billy Thompson came around the end of the station Sadie rode swiftly past to the South.

He called her name but she gave no sign that she had heard him.

"Where in the devil's she going this time of night?" he muttered, but the stars, dripping their frost light from the purple sky, were silent.

At midnight the glow of the lantern still shone out upon the sand through the walls of the tent. Within, Mrs. Fernandez and Rowley, and Billy Thompson, and Sansome—waited. The ticking of the nickel alarm clock on the shoe-case cupboard in one corner was the only sound. For a little while McGregor had slept fitfully, half waking now and then with little starts. Sansome watched closely; of them all, he had had some slight experience and realized that the moment of passing was not far distant. Billy had sought to learn where Sadie had gone—the dying boy had murmured her name in his sleep—but no one knew. The hands of the little alarm clock indicated half past two, when suddenly Skinny awakened and made a weak effort to sit up. Mrs. Fernandez supported him; Sansome bent closer.

"Much obliged, missus," the thin voice whispered. He had always called the Mexican woman that.

"Boys," he said after a moment, "it's the last card in the box. Make your bets."

Billy Thompson turned away.

Sadie

"You know," the voice went on, "it ain't so bad, after all. . . . It don't hurt—nor nothin'. . . . You just feel lazy like—and good. . . . You kind o' want to go—too. . . . It's like you was walkin' along a high, board fence. . . . You can hear the birds singin'—in there. . . and smell the flowers. . . . And you're lookin' for the gate—everywhere. . . . You want to see what's it's like—on the other side o' the fence. . . . On the level. . . . That's what it's like, boys. . . . Just like that." . . .

His head fell back on the pillow and he closed his eyes. . . .

After a long time he began to sing waveringly :

 " Oh, there was an old hen,
 And she had a wooden foot,
 She built herself a nest
 In a mulberry root.
 Oh, she put on a feather
 To keep herself warm,
 And another little drink
 Wouldn't do us any harm."

"M' father used to sing that," he murmured, "just for a kid. . . . I'm goin' out in the desert, boys—all alone. . . . 'T won't be cold 'n' 't won't be hot. . . . Just right. . . . Listen!" . . .

From the distance came the sound of galloping hoofs. McGregor leaned forward on his arm.

"Who's that?" he called, his voice strangely clear.

Billy Thompson snatched the flaps apart and peered out. In Main Street two riders were swiftly approaching. Another instant and Sadie galloped up to the tent

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with the padre from San Luis, twelve miles away. Then Billy knew. The priest, carrying a little bundle, entered the tent; the others came out, leaving him alone with a soul. . . .

Dawn, like a strip of steel-gray ribbon, stretched along the eastern sky as he issued from the tent and beckoned to Sadie. . . .

The ghost of a voice spoke to her as she sank upon her knees beside the cot.

"Good-by—Sadie," it whispered, "good-by," and he smiled.

As she had before, now again she slipped an arm under his neck and holding him close, as she might a child, murmured, "Dear—dear"—and kissed him on the brow. . . . And it was the touch of her lips, the light in her eyes, the sound of her voice, that he took with him out into the desert on the Long Trail.

The whole eastern sky was aflame; on the distant peak of Bill Phillips's mountain the sun balanced, converting the sand sweep into a shimmering sea of gold as Sadie appeared at the entrance of the tent. Billy Thompson started forward, but stopped. Reaching up the girl pulled at the twine halyard of the little flag, and as she did so the last breath of the night breeze caught the square of silk, caressed it an instant, then floated it out at half mast.

CHAPTER XXII

A DÉBUT IS PLANNED

IN a little patch of sand which Father Francis had consecrated behind the new hotel they buried Skinny as the shadows lengthened and the last light of the passing day turned to amethyst the rim of the distant mesa. Billy falteringly read the service from the little book the dead boy had treasured for so long, and afterwards Sansome played "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep" on his concertina. Apart from the others stood Sadie and Mrs. Fernandez, the latter weeping softly, while still farther away clustered little groups of strangers of whom there were many in Bagdad now, reverent witnesses of the primitive ceremony.

"It's jes' like he was one of m' own," Mrs. Fernandez whispered, but Sadie made no reply. Rowley, whom she had told of McGregor's wishes and who had eagerly begged the privilege of executing them for her, even to the extent of driving down to San Luis for the burial box, glanced at her and tried to smile, but it was a feeble effort.

Afterwards, Billy and Sadie walked over to the Palace together and sat on the porch until the stars came out.

All day long, in anticipation of this hour, he had

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gone over in his mind the things that he would say to her to-night; but now, alone with her, something restrained him, some subtle influence of the evening that he could feel but not identify.

"It won't be quite the same any more, will it?" Sadie said, as if to herself, after a period of silence.

Billy did not reply and she went on:

"It's the way, though, I guess. Sometimes, Billy, when I've been sitting in my room, all alone in the evening, looking at the sand out yonder, like snow in the starlight, it's seemed to me the desert's a heap sight more like life, after all, than the big crowded places back East are. Kind of a dopey idea, ain't it? But life's barren, too, Billy, when all's said and done, and sometimes, when you're blue and everything's on the bum, you get to wondering what's the use, don't you? But the wheel's going to turn over at the 'Monte' just the same, even if little Skinny is sleeping out there."

She told him, then, the episode of the scapular, and something of the story of McGregor's life as he had told it to her, and how he had given her his few belongings. "I suppose, Billy," she concluded, "if he'd told it all to a lot of the high foreheads back East, or anywhere else, his life wouldn't mean a bloomin' thing. But it's meant something to me, Billy—a whole lot."

"It's only what you make it," he replied, "just that—nothing else. It's never seemed to me that folks are really forgotten either—ever. And if you're decent and on the level, and have never dealt from a shaved deck, God ain't got any kick comin', I guess. I never doped

Sadie

it out the glory shouters have much to do with it, when all's said and done. Look at Skinny. Nobody ever heard *him* sobbin' round 'bout his troubles, and the Lord knows he had enough—so many he couldn't count 'em, from what you've said. And as for being on the level, I'll take a shot, at ten to one, he never worked that bum wheel crooked in his life, for all he could have, easy, if he'd wanted to. He just couldn't do it; that's all. It wasn't in him."

Sadie turned her face away and let fall her eyes.

Presently Billy arose.

"I guess we'd better be toddlin' back," he said. "We've got a lot to do to-morrow. The railroad gang'll be here by night. Al 'phoned he was coming over; we'll open Saturday, sure."

"What have you heard from the office?" she asked.

"Stevens comes on Number 6 to-morrow; Hutchinson's with him."

"Then I'll write Frances to-night," Sadie said. "She probably won't be able to get here for the opening, but that don't make any difference; there'll be enough to do afterwards."

As they approached the station Robinson came out of his little office with a telegram for Sadie that had only that moment been received. Given by some subtle instinct to know the nature of the message, she tore off the wrapper deliberately, read the few words at a glance, and crushed the sheet into a ball in her hand.

In the kitchen, beyond, the cook was singing as they entered the lunch room. He had lighted the lamp over

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the counter, and the little door beneath the stairs stood ajar.

Sadie turned and held out her hand to Billy.

"Good-night," she said, and smiled. As she gathered up her skirts the little yellow wad of paper fell to the floor. The door above clicked shut behind her. Stooping, Billy recovered the telegram. Mechanically his fingers smoothed it, the while he continued musingly to gaze out the glistening window across the room, into the night. Then—"Maybe she wouldn't want me to," he muttered, and so saying tore the wrinkled yellow sheet into tiny bits which he sifted through his fingers into the waste basket at the end of the counter. But if he had read the message it would have told him nothing:

"Sail to-morrow. Good-by.

"JIM."

During the days that followed, until Saturday night, neither Sadie nor Billy gave thought to anything beyond the work in hand.

On the arrival of Stevens and Hutchinson, the next afternoon, the eating house was spick and span for their reception, Billy's and Sadie's personal belongings having been transferred meantime to the Palace. Tunnison brought with him a twain of Mexican girls, at whom Sadie looked askance, a Chinese cook, and Jake, his Cottonwood bartender.

"I've told everybody we'll throw her open Sat'd'y night," the old man said, "and I don't reckon it takes news like that any too much time to sift through a coun-

try like thisher—only we've got a lot to do. Allie told me to say to Miss Morrison she'd come over and lend a hand if she wanted she should."

But Sadie didn't.

Moreover, Bagdad itself was revealing signs of a life that a year before not the most optimistic of its inhabitants would have dared to prophesy for it. The cinder siding, from the eating house to the water tank, was piled high with the rough baggage of those whom the lure of gold had drawn to this barren spot. The one street of the town was filled with men in the colorless clothes of the open, where before it had been all but deserted. The golden word was on every tongue, the yellow lust in every eye. Rowley, boisterously elate, was doing the greatest business in the history of the Bon Marché. Sansome's smile was indelible, and the owner of the Golden Fleece, which overnight almost had come to share the "Monte's" popularity—urged his workmen to greater swiftness in the construction of the long, low-ceiled dance hall he was building at the rear of his resort. Every train deposited in front of the little red station its quota of argonauts, and added its share to the ever-growing piles of freight and baggage on the cinder siding. Robinson went about haggard eyed and grumbling, and Hutchinson complained to his chief that he could see "the finish of that Topeka vacation, to say nothing of the breach of promise suit looming in the dusty distance." Each day now was as only pay days had been before. Tents dotted the sand in every direction, their occupants cursing the delay of outfits held up in transit. Train after

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train of plodding burros wended their way to the North, their owners jeering at their glowering brethren left behind. Within two days, on the strength of his samples alone, Rowley was made four offers for his distant claims by the eager representatives of as many newly formed and loudly advertised syndicates. And still the freight piled up, and still the dwellers in the mushroom tents cursed, the while they awaited the coming of the new line, which every hour brought nearer, as sweating, dust-crustured men toiled frantically, day and night, to bring about the miracle.

That Friday evening, under the huge new oil lamp in the office of the Palace—pungent with the acrid odor of fresh paint—sat Sadie, and Billy, and Tunnison, and Stevens.

"Well," observed the superintendent, addressing no one in particular, "I guess you're going to turn the trick all right."

"It's shore the fittin' time," Tunnison replied, shifting his quid, and casting an admiring glance in Sadie's direction.

"We've done pretty well with the help we've had," she said.

Stevens smiled.

"I'll never forget the hit you made that day you came to see me back in Kansas City," he recalled.

A wave of color swept into Sadie's cheeks.

Billy glanced at her and laughed, for Stevens had told him all about that first meeting and what Hutchinson had said.

Sadie

"Ever regret coming?" the superintendent pursued.

Sadie's eyes sparkled. "Out here?" she replied. "Regret it? Why, Mr. Stevens, I never knew what it was to live before. I've never wished a single time that I was back. I've only wished that all the folks there were here instead—not because I miss 'em, but for their own sakes."

"I told you Bagdad was bound to boom one of these days."

She nodded gayly. "And now it's come," she declared.

"A little too much," Billy put in, "a little too all-of-a-sudden." He drew a deep breath. "If we can only pull through to-morrow," he added, "we'll be O. K. Ain't that right, Al?"

"Don't you worry," Tunnison assured him; "she'll go through like a forty-four through a greaser."

"By the way," Billy exclaimed, "did I tell you they're going to pull off a dance down at the Golden Fleece?"

"To-morrow night?" Tunnison scowled.

"There's a big gang comin' up from San Luis, they tell me, and the whole Bar Y bunch will be on hand——"

Sadie leaned forward. "Bar Y," she interrupted, "why that's——"

"Curly Watrous's outfit, you know," Billy explained. "They've made him foreman, since he came back."

Sadie rose and went to the counter.

"One of the boys was telling me," Billy ran on, "that he heard Red Lawton was planning to blow in with a

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herd of sheepmen from over East. If he should, and they should get together—his people and the Bar Y—there might be trouble.”

Tunnison had risen, his little eyes glistening like a snake's, and as Billy ceased speaking he turned to the stairway.

“Where you going?” Thompson called across the room.

The old man wheeled about, a grimly sardonic grin twisting his leathery countenance.

“I'm a-goin' t' unlimber m' howitzer,” was the significant reply as he pulled the door shut after him.

It was early the next morning that Jake, the bartender, came upon Billy in the office of the hotel.

“Mr. Thompson,” he began and paused.

Billy looked up from the shiny roulette wheel he was polishing with a yellow, new chamois.

“Well?” he questioned.

“I was thinkin' las' night,” Jake went on cautiously, “that there's shore goin' to be a rush here t'night, an' tain't likely but what I'll be needin' more 'sistance.”

Billy cast a suspicious glance at him.

“What d' you want?” he snapped.

He had never cared for Jake overly much; his eyes were altogether too shifty.

“I was jes' thinkin,” the bartender pursued, “that if Mis' Morrison——”

Billy dropped the yellow chamois and stared into the fistlike face of the shifty Jake.

Sadie

"Miss Morrison help you serve booze to a lot of— Well, I should say——"

"Why not?" calmly inquired a voice behind them, and with one accord they turned to face Sadie, who stood smiling in the doorway, a broom in one hand, a dustpan in the other.

"You"—Billy began and paused, arrested by something in her eyes.

"Sure," she replied, whereupon Jake grinned foolishly. As for Billy, the brown eyes of the girl in the doorway seemed to be drilling little smooth tunnels through his heart.

"Oh, all right," he capitulated, with a shrug, recovering the chamois and resuming his task. "You're the boss."

Half an hour later Sadie encountered the bartender in the upper hallway and stopped him. "Now, look here, Jake," she warned, "I'm next to this country, and I'll stand for a good deal, but whenever anybody starts out to get gay with me, somethin' always happens. I'm paid to help here, and I'm willing to help. That's all right. So if you really want me to lend a hand, well and good; but if you've got it framed up for me to go into that barroom and sing while some cowpuncher plays the Jew's-harp, or blow bum notes through a mouth organ, here's where you get off. This is your station. Maybe I can take care of myself at all times and in all places, but if you've got it into your head that I'm a dance-hall sou-brette you want to smoke up. Understand?"

"On the level—" Jake began, throatily, but the girl interrupted:

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"All right, then, I'll help you; sure," she promised; and snatching up her pail passed on down the hall, leaving Jake, glued to the oilcloth, staring after her.

Thus was it arranged that Sadie Morrison should make her *début* at the opening of the Palace that night, as the first barmaid ever to appear in the desert.

"When the news trickles through, there'll shore be suthin' doin'," Jake assured himself.

And the news did trickle through straightway. Jake saw to that, despite the frosty warning Sadie had given him. He told Bub Gleason of the Bar Y outfit whom he chanced to meet in the course of the morning at the Bon Marché, and Bub told others, and they told others still, until by evening it would appear that every restless man for miles around had heard it.

"You goin' over t'night?" Bub inquired of Curly Watrous as he rode up to the bunk house, just before supper.

Watrous, sitting in the doorway, nodded. "Somebody's got to be sane, hasn't there? Somebody's got to keep you fellows and the sheriff apart. Well, I've elected myself the buffer."

"Don't forgit the dance at the Fleece," cautioned Bub, with a grin.

Watrous smiled, and shook his head.

"Doncher dance?" urged the puncher wonderingly.

"I don't at the Golden Fleece," was the terse reply as the speaker blew an opalescent ring of smoke at the glowing sky.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE OPENING OF THE PALACE

SOUNDS of revelry issued from the low-ceiled bake-oven, one "block" below the Palace, called by its imaginative proprietor—he had come from Massachusetts—"The Golden Fleece." In the dry, superheated atmosphere of the new dance hall, the swinging kerosene lamps burned with a metallic luster. Through the low-hanging strata of smoke the dancers glided as in a mist. The music, afforded by a rattling piano and a screeching violin, rose above the shouts of the men and the high-pitched, tragic laughter of their painted partners. The girl at the piano, a wan creature in an abbreviated red dress, swayed from side to side in time with the music which she seemed to wrench, muscularly, from the resisting instrument. The solid thumps of high, Spanish heels shook the floor. The lamps hanging from the ceiling swung dangerously. The picture was one of riotous revelry; of emotions gone mad and feet flying of their own accord.

Hunched up in his chair by the door sat Bub Gleason, hungrily sucking at a corn-husk cigarette.

"Where you goin'?" he called as Watrous approached, keeping close to the wall and threading his way like a weary shuttle through the glaring warp of the dance.

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"Looking for my breathings," was the reply. "Where's the air hole anyway?"

"Aincha havin' a good time?" Bub called after him, but there was no answer.

In the street Watrous pulled a deep breath and whistled with relief. Seating himself on the edge of the sidewalk he looked up at the glittering stars. There was not a little of the sentimental in Curly Watrous, and what there was came to the surface now. The desert night was, for the moment, far more in harmony with his mood than was the chaos from which he had emerged. He felt, perhaps, that he had a great deal in common with the stars up there, after all. They were very alone despite their multitude; and he, though in the midst of the earthly outfit, was alone, too. Slowly he rolled a cigarette. Beyond the bar, at his back, the piano ceased its wail and he heard the brassy voiced fiddler shout:

"S'lect yer pardners fer a kadrill!"

Watrous rose, then, and slouched down the street. As he passed he glanced through the doorway of the Last Chance, the newest saloon, opened three days before by a man from Barstow. Half a dozen idling miners formed a crescent in front of the wheel. The slot machines ranged along the wall were deserted; two of them bore signs, "Out of Order;" but facing the "bank" at the end of the room were eight men whom he recognized, almost as if by instinct, as members of Reddy Lawton's sheep outfit from over East. The lookout, from his throne, glimpsed him through the doorway and waved his hand. At the motion one of the players—who

Sadie

chanced to be Red Lawton himself—half turned in his chair, gave him a glance, and reverted to the game. As a cowman Watrous looked with scorn upon all “bleaters.” Such he heaped with contumely, and, after the manner of his tribe, refused to recognize even after a conventional introduction, He walked on.

Through the wide-open doorway of the Palace bar floated out upon the soft night air the melody of “After the Ball,” played upon a mouth organ. A moment Watrous hesitated, then entered. Jake, whom he had often met at Cottonwood, nodded to him as he strode down the room and seated himself at a little table in front of a glistening, new dollar slot machine at the further end. At two near-by tables a number of sheepmen were drinking. Half a dozen cowboys elbow to elbow stood at the bar. Jake was alone in front of the gauze-covered mirror, his shirt open at the throat, his sleeves rolled to his elbows. Evidently some one had “strung” Bub with that tale of a barmaid, Watrous decided. But he was quite wrong. It was as yet too early; that was all. Jake had assured Sadie he would not call upon her save as a last resort and thus far he had been able to serve the Palace’s guests without assistance. At the moment Sadie was busy above stairs arranging the rooms of the hotel’s first guests whom the long overland had deposited in front of the red station half an hour before. As for Billy and Tunnison, they were auditing the last bills in the little cubby-hole the former had fitted up for himself at the end of the hallway. Within five minutes, however, the air of Main Street was suddenly rent by a

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series of metallic yells and the "bleaters" whom Watrous had seen in the Last Chance flocked into the bar with Reddy Lawton at their head. Instinctively the punchers pressed closer together and let their right hands fall carelessly to their hips. Watrous glanced swiftly from them to the open doorway, as if measuring the distance. But if Lawton, half drunk as he was, perceived these things he gave no sign.

"Where's that girl o' yourn, Jake?" he called hoarsely. "Trot'er out! Le's have a squint at 'er!"

Jake grinned and wiped his hands on the bar towel.

"I guess I'll have t' with all this bunch," he declared.

One of the sheepmen at a table by the door began to sing. The chorus of the ballad was shouted lustily by his fellows. The strains of the mouth organ were completely vanquished. And then, with a suddenness that was startling, a thick, breathless silence settled upon the room. Following the direction of the eyes in front of him, Watrous turned. There, in front of the little door at the end of the bar, stood Sadie, smiling. Lawton, a gleam of recognition lighting his filmy eyes, craned forward.

"Hello, boys!" she greeted them, and gave a little upward toss of her head that shook her pompadour.

Watrous stared at her curiously as she stood there with one hand on the end rail of the bar, as if waiting; as nonchalantly as if her being there, under such circumstances, were quite the most ordinary situation in the world. To him, in the instant it was given him to analyze, it was as if she were enclosed within a strange

element all her own, something invisible yet none the less entirely protective. Perhaps it was an aura; perhaps nothing more or less than the personality of a pretty girl. But whichever it might be, here, he realized, was no painted lady. Hers was the independence, the fearlessness of such an one perhaps; but it was an independence born of confidence rather than of hopelessness.

As for Lawton, not since that momentous night long ago when Billy Thompson, with this girl's assistance, had given him "the can" from Bagdad, had he seen her. San Luis alone had known his presence in the interim, and as his heavy, lustful eyes rested upon her now all his old hate came back a thousandfold intensified by the girl's indifferent regard. That night, brooding in the smoker, he had sworn that there would come a day for Billy Thompson and for this girl, and now he recalled that oath. He hated her even as he hated Thompson—as he hated all men and all women if he but realized. She was speaking, her voice clear and even; and as she spoke she smiled, the gold in her teeth glinting in the lamplight.

"Boys," she said, "what are you goin' to have? I'm going to help Jake here. He couldn't take care of this bunch in a thousand years. Now don't all break out at once like you were hit with the measles, but let 'em come easy. What'll it be?"

The spell that her appearance had cast upon the room lifted as she spoke. Somebody by the door whooped. Sadie laughed. The orders they flung at her were not sufficient to confuse her, being of a single import. With

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a shining, leaning tower of telescoped glasses in either hand she went swiftly from table to table placing one in front of each man. Her back was turned to the crowd as she stopped in front of the little table at which Watrous sat alone. And then for the first time her eyes met his. An instant she hesitated; mechanically she pushed the glass across the table. Then he smiled up into her face and she returned the smile. Into her eyes and about the corners of her mouth there crept a little faint expression of wistfulness, and she drew her lower lip between her teeth as if in doubt.

“Fill ’em up!”

At the call she turned, with a quick glance over her shoulder. Watrous had dropped his eyes and was fingering his glass. Swiftly she served them all, collecting as she did so. She was directly in front of Watrous again as Lawton, his face flushed, got unsteadily upon his feet, one hairy hand clutching the table edge.

“Here’s t’ th’ barmaid!” he cried hoarsely. “Say! I remember you, but I don’t know yer name. Wha’s yer name, anyway?”

She did not smile as she glanced at him, albeit she realized she had nothing to fear now.

“Sadie,” was her terse answer. The crowd laughed—all but Watrous.

“Here’s t’ Sadie!” Lawton growled, and glanced about him. The clamor broke forth afresh. A little close-cropped fellow with bow legs and watery eyes begged a dance. She refused him; others she refused, who sought her favor, but always with a smile.

"*Kin* yeh dance, anyway?" Lawton demanded. "Yeh didn't th' las' time I saw yeh!" He chuckled in his throat.

"I can, but I ain't goin' to," was the quick reply.

The jeers of his companions brought the blood to Lawton's face. Brushing aside those who would restrain him he staggered out into the middle of the floor.

"Cancha change yer mind?" he snarled.

The girl's swift perception told her his intent. Casting a frightened glance about her she glided down the room. Jake was not behind the bar. Where was he, or Billy, or Al, or anybody? At Watrous's table she stopped, and turning, confronted her leering pursuer. Watrous, behind, saw her clenched fists, white against the red stain of the table top.

"An' mebbe this time ye'll gi' a feller a kiss!" he heard. He saw her hands go forward. There sounded a jeering laugh as, struggling, she was bent back over the table. But it was not her lips that Reddy Lawton's were to touch just then. Instead his half-drunken kiss was imprinted upon the cold muzzle of Curly Watrous's .44, and quite clearly there sounded in his throbbing ears:

"Take your hands off that girl or I'll spatter you all over this joint!"

The tense stillness of the instant that followed was broken by the distant whistle of Number 8.

Dazed and bulging-eyed, Lawton obeyed the softly spoken command.

Let it not be thought that this little vaudeville was attended to its climax by every occupant of the Palace

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bar. Lawton's rôle was not unusual. His acting had been but indifferently observed. Indeed, amid the clatter of glass and the general confusion, even Watrous's little speech at the close of the piece was heard by no one save the cowboys closest to him, and by Jake who, at the moment of its delivery, had entered through the door at the end of the bar. It was only when Lawton drew slowly back, his eyes fastened upon the little circle of the revolver barrel, that some understanding of what was taking place at the end of the room dawned upon his mates. At the table, leaning over, one hand resting on the top, stood Watrous, foreman of the Bar-Y. A little apart, the half dozen cowboys of his outfit, hands at hips—waited. Beside him, her face drawn and ashen, Sadie crouched—one hand pressed to her cheek.

All thought of the gun, sagging at his hip, appeared to have fled from Lawton's numbed brain.

"This ain't the Palace at San Luis, friend." Watrous's lips seemed barely to move. "Back out!"

Slowly the order was obeyed. No one interfered. Save for the shuffle of Lawton's feet as he moved toward the door, a stillness fraught with lightning prevailed in the room.

On the threshold Lawton gave a quick glance over his shoulder. In front of the station the engine bell of Number 8 was ringing.

"There's a day comin' fer you!" he snarled. "A day fer you and fer Billy Thompson, too. You got me now"—He was on the porch. Behind him one of the

cowboy's ponies nickered. Number 8, coughing with the effort, was pulling out—"you damned maverick—you an' that——"

Watrous sprang around the table with an oath.

"Boy! Boy!"

He heard Sadie's shrill warning. It was over in an instant. She had seen the quick motion of Lawton's hand as Watrous leaped. The explosion shivered the chimney of one of the swinging lamps and the glass fell crashing to the floor. The figure that had sprung in front of him tottered and collapsed at Watrous's feet—her white waist stained all down the front a deep, rich red——

Behind, a voice spoke.

"Sift out! We got you covered."

In the doorway at the end of the bar stood Billy Thompson with a Winchester, while Jake, alive at last, with a Colt's in each hand, swept the room broadside.

On the instant every sheepman broke for cover without.

Lawton had leaped upon the back of the first pony at hand and as the bar emptied was riding like the wind down Main Street directly for the siding, amid a rain of bullets. Number 8 was gathering speed. With a yell, the pack of cowboys were upon him, firing as they galloped. Guiding his pony close to the sides of the gliding Pullmans Lawton dropped the reins, reached out, caught the rail and swung himself from the saddle aboard the last platform of the now swiftly moving train. And there, four hours later, when the train stopped for water

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at Mason's Tank, he was found, dead, and drenched with the blood from seven bullet wounds.

In her room at the Palace lay Sadie. Sansome, quickly summoned, had brought with him a tourist doctor arrived that day. Leaning against the banister, just outside the door, Watrous, and Billy, and Tunnison waited. . . . After half an hour Sansome and the doctor came out.

"It's not much," the latter announced, "just in the shoulder. She'll be all right presently. Let her rest a bit. Don't worry. I've told that Mexican girl what to do."

They filed down the stairs, then, Curly Watrous last.

"What was it all about, Curly?" Billy asked, when the others had gone, and they were alone on the porch. Watrous told him.

"I see," Thompson said, and held out his hand. "Better come over in the morning and see how she is," he added.

Hours later he crept noiselessly down the hallway and pressing his cheek against the panel of Sadie's door, listened.

"Seems to be sleeping all right," he whispered to himself, as he tiptoed back to his own room.

CHAPTER XXIV

WELL, AFTER ALL—

JERRY ROWLEY was displaying his stock of quirts and bridles for the benefit of Bub Gleason at the rear of the Bon Marché, on a sunshiny afternoon some ten days later, as Billy sauntered in. The latter had taken to smoking a pipe of late and it was now his mood to scorn cigarettes as well as those who smoked them. The puncher, absentmindedly puffing at a brown-wrapped tube, looked up as he approached.

"How long since?" he inquired, with a grin.

Billy, who recognized him from the Bar Y symbol scrawled in charcoal on the upturned brim of his be-draggled hat, removed the pipe from his mouth and replied:

"Since what?"

"Since you took t' firin' a stove?"

"Don't you like that pípe?" Thompson asked, holding it off at arm's length and admiring it, with his head cocked to one side. "I tell you there's nothing like a pipe when a fellow's got a heap o' thinking to do. Those hay-fever inhalers are all right for babies, and cowboys, maybe, but when you're running a hotel you've got to have something solider."

Bub laughed, and Rowley grinned.

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"How's the lady?" the former inquired.

"She's all right," Billy assured him. "It didn't amount to much; just plowed up her shoulder, that's all."

"Any of Lawton's gang been around since?" the cowboy pursued.

Thompson shook his head. "Couldn't find one of 'em with a fine-tooth comb," he declared.

"D' ye know," Bub went on sourly, removing his cigarette and laying it at the edge of the counter, "I wish I c'd 'a' had a look at that guy 'fore they planted him. Me'n the boss—Curly, y' know—got into a argyment 'bout it. He 'lowed I never hit him 't *all*. I 'lowed I did. I let drive two times, once when he wa'nt more'n twenty-five yards away, an' once jus' as he made his flyin' leap. If I'd 'a' had a chance t' prod around in 'is carkiss I'll bet I c'd 'a' found *my lead*. But say, did ye ever see sech a git-away in your life—him a-ridin' up alongside that train an' swingin' aboard? Couldn't he'p admirin' the nerve o' the cuss. On the square I kind o' hated to let go at him, and I don't know as I would 've *if it hadn't been my hoss!*"

"You saw it then, did you?" Billy inquired, with some show of reviving interest.

"Saw it? I should say I did!"

He selected one of the quirts and paid for it with his wage check which he produced from inside the sweat-band of his hat.

"Lady up 'n out, eh?" he went on, slapping his creaky chaps with the snaky lash. "Looks like Curly had it pretty bad, don't it; ridin' over every day? Jes'

Sadie

like a story, ain't it? Well, s' long." And he teetered out of the store on his high heels, his spurs clinking and the leather of his costume squeaking like new shoes.

Afterwards for a little while, Billy and Jerry sat together under the new awning, Rowley's contribution to the greater glory of Main Street.

Three days before, the railway from the North had reached the main line at Bagdad. Since then the pile of freight on the siding had grown continuously less as one after another of the gold outfits departed for the new fields. Also there were fewer tents dotting the sand now than there had been the week before, but, as Jerry said, "The ol' town'll never be what she used t' be," which brought back to the mind of Billy Thompson memory of that day when he and Robinson and Skinny had spat at the lizard in front of the station. Where the lizard had lain, basking in the sun, now stood a private car, arrived that noon, its brass work glistening in the dazzling light.

Rowley gave Thompson a questioning glance from the tail of his eye.

"Take much stock in all this talk 'bout Curly an'—her?" he inquired presently.

"Which talk?" was the reply, though Billy knew quite well to what the storekeeper referred.

"Miss Morrison——"

Billy shifted in his chair.

"You mean Sadie?"

"Th' same. 'Course I know he's been comin' over here every day since th'—th' *accident*," he observed,

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“but mebbe that don’t mean nothin’—that is to say, nothin’ *special*. ’Tain’t any more’n what anybody’d do, likely, only the Bar-Y boys kind o’ got the idee him ’n’ Sadie—I mean Miss Morrison—’ll hit it off. Think they will?”

“How the devil d’ you suppose I know?” was the tart rejoinder.

“I didn’t realize you felt that way ’bout it,” Jerry pursued soothingly, “only it would be a blamed shame, that’s all—a blamed shame. Who knows anything ’bout him, anyway? Nobody, far’s I can see. Guess I’ve known him ever since he’s been here, so’ve you. But they don’t neither of us really *know* him; all about him, I mean—who he is, where he came from, an’ the like o’ that. Seem’s if I’d know, if anybody did, prospectin’ with him up yonder, but I don’t——”

“Ever try to draw him out?” Billy inquired thoughtfully.

“Yes—an’ got set on,” was the ruminative reply. “’Member them callin’ cards he passed out when he first showed up? I’ve got one of ’em in the safe yet—saved it as a curiosity. ‘William Cunliffe Watrous’ was the way it read, ’f I ricollect rightly. Flossy soundin’ name, ain’t it? ’Tain’t that I got anything ag’in Curly, for I ain’t. Far’s I know he’s all right, on the level, decent, ’n’ all that; but jes’ the same he’s a mystery; an’ I guess you’n me both think too much of the Sadie girl to let her hook up with a *mystery*, ’ithout so much as liftin’ a hand to stop her, less’n she knows jes’ what she’s doin’.”

Sadie

"You're right, Jerry," Billy agreed, "but what can we do about it?"

Rowley moved uneasily.

"I thought one of us, mebbe, ought t' take her t' one side an' sort o' tell her——"

Billy faced him. "Why don't you, then?" he inquired.

Jerry pursed his lips. "Well, I thought you—bein' right there," he began hesitatingly, but Billy interrupted:

"Who? Me? Me tell her what to do? Not in seventeen million years," he declared, rising. "I know her too well. That's just the trouble. No, Jerry," he added, as he filled his pipe afresh, "it's Sadie's game and she's got to play it to the finish. There's nothing for you and me to do but just look on—over her shoulder."

Rowley rose with a sigh. "All right, then, we'll wait," he said. Taking Billy's arm he drew him back into the store. "I 'most forgot," he explained, "come on in here jes' a minute; I got something I want t' show you."

With much mystery he led the way to the extreme rear of the establishment. He had partitioned off a little nook there with a wall of tinned-meat cases, and Billy knew that oftentimes, in the old days, when his condition precluded ever finding his 'dobe, it had been his custom to sleep here on the floor. A door gave into the corner from the outside, and during the day a single, dusty window let in a little sunlight. Billy squeezed between the boxes after Rowley until both were within the dim

Well, After All—

little compartment. On the floor, covered with a burlap, lay a thin, oblong object, over which the storekeeper stooped.

"I brought it up from San Luis las' night," he said. "They ain't nobody seen it but you."

He drew off the covering then, and the sunlight, filtering through the unwashed window, fell upon a narrow slab of granite, on which, deeply cut, was this:

HERE LIES
SKINNY MCGREGOR,
HE WAS A GAME
LITTLE CUSS.

Still bending over the slab, Rowley turned his head, and looking up into Billy's face asked:

"How do you like it?"

But something lumpy had crowded into Billy Thompson's throat, just as something misty had gathered in his eyes, and for a moment he did not reply, but in that moment his hand somehow found Rowley's shoulder and rested there.

"That was pretty—pretty fine of you, Jerry," he muttered huskily, finding his voice at last.

"I'm goin' t' set it up, out there, jes' as soon's I git the time," Rowley promised, as he spread the burlap again. "D' you s'pose she'll like it?"

"You mean Sadie?" Billy replied. "Why, Jerry, you couldn't have done anything that would please her

Sadie

more. She thought a heap of that little fellow—a whole heap. And what's written on it's just what she'd have put there, too—and what Skinny'd like best of all to have on it."

"I couldn't think of anything better," Rowley confessed as they came out under the awning.

Off in the east, riding toward the mesa, he descried two figures.

"There they go," he exclaimed, his hand on Billy's arm.

Thompson turned, and for a space both men continued to gaze at the distant riders until their own dust clouds obscured them, when with a nod Billy walked silently away.

"It looks as if there might be something in the talk after all," he told himself, as he ascended the porch of the Palace.

In the shade of the mesa, on the eastern slope, sat Sadie and Watrous side by side. A little way apart their horses stood in that attitude of deep dejection and monumental thought which is ever the pose of the cow pony off duty. Sadie was toying with Watrous's revolver, now and then holding it off at arm's length and sighting along the blue barrel at a distant cactus. After a while, tiring of this, she reached out to slip the weapon back into its holster and Watrous caught her wrist. Her face was very close to his; an instant they gazed deep into each other's eyes, then hers fell.



“On the eastern slope sat Sadie and Watrous side by side.”

Well, After All—

"Sadie," he said, "not once since the night it happened have I asked you, and you haven't offered to tell me of your own accord—won't you now? What made you do it?"

Her eyes opened very wide.

"Do what?"

He smiled.

"Cut in when that damned sheep opened up?"

"Oh, you mean that?" she replied. "What *made* me? Why, Curly, that's a funny question! *What made me?* Why, boy, I couldn't help it!"

About them, here, was spread a dead nature. They and the dozing horses were the only living things in all the world.

"But you'd never seen me up to half an hour before," he insisted.

"Oh, yes, I had," she caught him up quickly, with a smile. "The night of the dance, down at San Luis—the night you went North." She shut her eyes and described to him the picture that she saw. "I was up in the balcony—in one of those little stalls. I saw you across the dance hall, down below. You were sitting on a table. You had pushed back your hat and the light struck on your hair. That was the first time, Curly. And the second time was that same night. You were talking to Billy under the torch in the yard. When you lit your cigarette you looked up at the window where I was, and I drew back because I thought you saw me. You didn't though, I guess. And the next time was that night in the Palace. But the number of times don't cut

Sadie

any ice—it's just that I *saw* you—and I *did* see you—didn't I, Curly?"

"Yes, I know, Sadie, but——"

She lifted her face; a touch of color had come into her cheeks.

"Well?" she questioned.

He leaned toward her. "You *did*, Sadie?" he whispered, "the first time you saw me?"

She dug her heel into the sand and studied the hem of her skirt.

"It would almost seem as if I did, wouldn't it, Curly?" was her evasive answer.

"And then, when the chance came, you jumped in and took the bullet that was meant for me?" He seemed to hang upon her reply. It came straightway, direct.

"Why, sure," she said, as her eyes met his squarely. "Sadie!"

He seized her hand, and bending over, kissed it again and again. She smiled as she had smiled when she placed the glass before him on the table, back in the bar of the Palace that night, and unconsciously she drew into her lap the hand that he had kissed and covered it with her other hand.

The shadow of the mesa was creeping farther and farther out upon the desert which stretched away before them to the world's end. For a little while neither spoke, then Watrous said:

"Sadie, nobody out here knows anything about me; I've never told anyone; do you want me to tell you?"

Well, After All—

She turned to him and shook her head. "You needn't if you don't want to, Curly."

"But I do," he declared. "I was in Harvard, Sadie," he began, building a little cone of sand between his knees, "that's the big college down by Boston, you know. I was a regular mutt those days. Of course I didn't realize it then, but I do now. I learned to ride a bang-tailed pony, and belonged to a pistol club. The boys here never have been able to figure it out how it happens that I can ride and shoot. Well, that's how. I was almost through, there in college, when something happened; it don't make any difference what, and I was fired. My dad stood up on his hind legs and danced like a locoed bronc. Anyway I guess he was sick of paying for the polo pony. He told me to duck. I ducked. I hit the trail for Utah, then Nevada, then here. I hear from the folks at home once in a while. I don't write often. Of course I'd go back if I had to, but I guess I never will. If there's anyone that'll get me back it's my mother. I'm worth some money, Sadie, too. Not that that makes any difference, only I happen to be. My two claims up North of Timber mountain are worth anyway a hundred thousand dollars, for I've been offered that for them. So you see I've nothing to worry about as far as making both ends meet is concerned. And that's all. Not much of a story, is it? Tame as shooting sage hens, isn't it? But, Sadie, the last ten days I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I want to ask you something. Promise me one thing, Sadie?"

"What?" she asked quietly.

Sadie

"That you'll answer me fair?"

"But there's something you're holding back, boy," she recalled. "What about the girl? Curly, can you look me square in the eyes and tell me there ain't a girl, back East, somewhere?"

He leaned toward her and one of his bronzed hands closed over one of hers where it lay passive in her lap.

"I'll not lie—Sadie—not to you; there was *once*, but that's all past—now."

"Oh, no, Curly," she replied, as she slowly shook her head, "it ain't. It'll never be past—never as long as you stay out here. No, Curly, don't ask me what you were going to—for your own sake, Curly, for I've got my answer all framed up now, and it's 'No,' Curly, 'No.'"
She lifted a restraining hand. "Do you think I didn't realize this would be the finish? Oh, boy! I knew it the first time I looked into your eyes and saw yours looking into mine. And don't you suppose I knew *then* what you were—that you didn't belong out here, and never would if you stayed forever, and wore chaps and a gun till you died. And I know what that girl's like, too. I lived back East once, as I told you the first time you came to see me after that night it happened, and used to see lots of 'em. And, God! how I hated 'em! That was before I got wise. Curly, it's like ponies; there are broncs that'll follow you around all day, and there are others that'll never be tamed this side of — you know. You're for that girl back East, Curly; you're hers. As for me, I belong out here, even if I didn't find it for a long, long time. When I did, I knew it. That I wasn't

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born out here was a mistake. I realize it now. And that He let me come later was God's way of correcting the mistake He'd made. That's all. I'm going to stay here always. Probably when I finish I'll grow up again—a cactus. Curly, just because a girl would die for a fellow don't mean she'd marry him—out here. Maybe I'm a few chips shy on making myself clear, Curly"—she gripped his shoulders firmly and leaned close to him—"but tell me you understand. Tell me."

Their eyes met.

"Tell me," she pleaded.

"Yes."

As he spoke she brushed his yellow hair back from his forehead tenderly, and there was revealed a scar that she had never seen before.

"What made that?" she asked, touching the spot. He smiled.

"That?" he replied. "That's my lucky dent. It's a constant reminder of two things, Sadie girl—one, that I came pretty near cashing in once upon a time; the other, that you never can tell."

A look of puzzlement came into her eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I got it up North—prospecting. I fell in with a chap up there, as you will, you know, and we pushed on, into the hills together. It was after Rowley and I had separated. He was a good-enough fellow—high-tempered and nervous. He told me a long hard-luck story that I don't remember. . . . We were playing cribbage. . . . There was a row. . . . He pegged eight when he

Sadie

ought to have pegged only six. . . . What's the matter?"

Sadie had drawn back from him and was staring wide-eyed into his face.

"Nothing," she managed to reply; "go on."

"Just as he shot I ducked . . . hit my head on the corner of the table. . . . It knocked me out. . . . When I came to he was gone . . . So was my suitcase and my money. . . . Never would have thought it of him in the world. . . . But that's what I say—'You never can tell.'"

He reached out, smiling, to take her hand, but as she spoke, some quality in her voice restrained him.

"What was his—his name?" she whispered.

"Lacy——"

With a little sharp cry she flung both arms about his neck and drawing him to her kissed him again and again, murmuring, "O boy! Boy!" Then, even before he had recovered from the amazement her action induced, she sprang up, ran to her pony, and mounting, rode away, leaving him to follow as he chose.

A space he sat there, thinking, gazing the while at a huge cactus ball out on the sand beyond the mesa's shadow line.

"And yet she wouldn't marry me," he muttered, "even after kissing me like that just to show how glad she was the son-of-a-gun didn't happen to plug me."

The mesa's shadow line had crept across the distant cactus before he rose, at last, and mounting his pony rode away.

Bagdad lay before him, the uneven fronts of Main

Well, After All—

Street shimmering in the sun of late afternoon. At the further edge of the town sprawled the red water tank; on his left, to the south, ran the railway; beyond, in every direction, within the range of distant ragged peaks—the desert. A passenger train had pulled out ten minutes before, yet some of the locomotive's smoke was still visible, floating like a plume of vapor against the cloudless sky.

The polished brasswork on the observation platform of the private car that Number 5 had left on the siding beyond the eating house glittered in the sunlight. A private car on the siding at Bagdad was still an anomaly, and Watrous brought his pinto to a walk as he approached. The nose of the little animal was not three feet from the glittering platform grill when the narrow door opened and a man wearing a suit of khaki, and russet puttees, and a wide-brimmed hat, stepped out. Between him and Watrous there passed a flash of recognition, and as the man in khaki leaned over the rail, Watrous sprang from his pony and dropped the reins.

"By Jove, Mr. Armstrong," he cried, "how are you!"

And Curly Watrous permitted himself to be fairly dragged into the private car of the first vice-president of the Salt Lake & Gulf Ry. Nor was he aware that the little scene was witnessed from the porch of the Palace Hotel by Sadie and Billy Thompson.

Thus it came about that the next day he rode forth into the desert with the man in khaki, and the next, and the next, but on the fourth day he came back to Sadie.

Together they walked a little way down the track

Sadie

where they found a seat on a packing case in the shade of the water tank.

"You've come to say good-by, Curly, haven't you?" she asked.

He took her hand; she did not attempt to withdraw it.

"Yes," he replied glumly.

"What's the use making a funeral of it?" she reproved. "I'm glad."

He gave a little shrug.

"Is Mr. Armstrong a friend of yours?" she inquired. "You see I know him. He was at the Palace this morning."

"Yes, he's a friend of my people," he told her, "back in Philadelphia. Sadie," he ran on hurriedly, "his is the only old face—the only old-home face—I've seen in all the time I've been out here. He's told me all about my people, and the chaps I used to know, and the town. Lord, we've sat up till nearly morning, every night, down there in his car, talking. It's been like being back, almost, just to hear him. And, Sadie," he pressed her hand, "I've got to go. I've got to walk up Chestnut Street, and cross over to Walnut, and go down Broad to Market, and just walk and walk, and dodge the cabs and the street cars, and buy a paper of a newsboy—think of it, Sadie, to-day's paper to-day! And I'm going to sit in a theater again, Sadie, and eat a meal in a swell restaurant, and loaf in the lobby of that big new hotel he told me about!" His grip upon her wrist tightened. "And in four days, Sadie, I'll be doing it all—just——"

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"Four days," she breathed. "When are you going, Curly?"

"To-day—on Number 3."

She withdrew her hand then and turned away.

"It'll be here in a few minutes," she reminded him calmly.

"I know it," he replied. "I put it off till the last minute."

She turned to him then and smiled.

Taking both his hands in hers: "You're going back home," she murmured; "back home. Did Mr. Armstrong tell you anything about that girl——?"

He knew he need not avoid her eyes now.

"Yes," he confessed with a little smile, "he told me about her, too——"

"O Curly, I'm so glad! It's all come out right, after all, hasn't it? Just the way I knew it would. And you're going back home—back to her. O boy, good-by! Good-by!——"

The complete Bar-Y outfit galloped up the cinder siding in a bunch as Number 3, East bound, took on the car. Their boyish foreman and the vice-president stood on the platform.

"Good-by, 'Curly-locks,' and Gawd bless yeh!" shouted Bub Gleason, waving his new quirt.

"Give my regards to Broadway! Remember me to Herald Square!" cried another, new on the range that season.

"Good-by, boys!" Watrous called back. "When I

Sadie

get home I'll eat lobster and crabs for every man in the outfit—back there where they never saw a horned toad!”

Up ahead the engine bell rang. A great cheer arose from the riders on the siding and with one accord every puncher in the outfit whipped out his gun and a salvo of shots was the Bar-Y's Godspeed to “Curly Locks.”

But the thoughts of “Curly Locks,” that last moment, were not of the bunch. Misty-eyed, he shifted his gaze over their heads, past the red station, and across the white, dusty Main Street, to the porch of the Palace hotel, where, beside a green pillar, stood the white-clad figure of Sadie. He waved his hat. She saw the motion and waved her handkerchief in return, and to him, on the first breath of the evening breezes, was carried her shrill cry:

“Good luck!”

Billy Thompson found her half an hour later in the little enclosed back yard of the Palace where the open gate in the fence framed a narrow picture of the desert. At the sound of his footsteps Sadie turned.

“This came for you, about ten minutes ago,” he said. “Robinson brought it over.” And he gave her a telegram.

Her cheeks went pale as she tore open the yellow envelope, but with a single glance at the written words she sprang up with a cry:

“O Billy, they're coming to-night—Frances, and Grace and her husband! Think of it, Billy! Think of

Well, After All—

it! The telegram's only from Ash Fork! Billy! Billy! I want to jump up and down and dance!"

And she did dance, through the little gate, out among the cactus, across the sand. Then suddenly she became calm again.

"Billy!" she called, and as he appeared she pointed and asked: "What's Jerry Rowley doing out there by Skinny's grave?"

With infinite labor the storekeeper had trundled the little monument across the sand in a wheelbarrow and now was engaged in setting it up.

Billy told her, and when he had explained it all she turned to him, without thought of her tears, and seizing both his hands exclaimed:

"O Billy, how I love this country!"

They walked back to the fence, then, and he found a seat for her on a box that once had held four dozen tins of corn, and drew another alongside.

From the kitchen behind came the high-pitched voice of the Chinese cook berating one of the Mexican girls.

"Sadie," Billy said, "has Curly gone for good?"

She nodded.

He began leisurely to fill his pipe.

"Maybe I ought not to mention it," he went on, "but I couldn't help noticing the trend things have been taking since—since that night. I never felt that I knew Curly very well. He never spoke of himself, though I suppose, maybe—he told you——"

"He told me everything, Billy," Sadie interrupted.

Sadie

"And I guess, maybe, you had something to do with his going," he ventured.

She shook her head.

"I wouldn't say that," she replied.

"Anyway, he's gone," he pursued. "Sadie, ever since you've been here, this old town's been different from what it was before. And ever since you've been here I've been different, too——"

"Wait a minute, Billy," she interrupted. "I know what's been in your mind all the time. And I know what's been there mostly the last ten days." She smiled. "You've been wondering about Curly—and me. Billy, do you remember I told you once that I could never go away from this country? I feel it more to-day, Billy, than ever before. I could never make you understand what bein' out here, as I am, has meant to me. Curly Watrous was just an echo, Billy—an echo from back yonder. That night I saw him down at San Luis I heard it for the first time—I heard it again the night I got hurt—and I've heard it every day since. But it's been fainter and fainter each time. It was a test to me, Billy, and I stood it; that's all. Do you remember, coming back from that dance, too, Billy, I told you that once there was a time when I could have killed a man——"

He took her hand. "Wait a minute, Sadie," he said; "that was before you came out here, so it don't count—with me. Look off there." He pointed to the north. "It's raining off there. Look! See how the sun shines through. And it don't even touch the ground,

Well, After All—

that rain; the sun pulls it up again before it hits. That's the troubles of the old life, Sadie. It's the rain. And even when it's coming down the sun's shining through. And look, all around where we are there ain't a speck—nothing but bright light. We're in the middle of it—you and I—in the middle of the sunshine——”

Sadie rose. “Let's walk out yonder,” she said.

“I know it,” she went on, after a moment; “nobody knows it any better than I do. It's all clear to me now—as clear as day. It's just as I told him—I belong out here——”

“We belong out here together, I guess,” he replied.

They stood beside Skinny's grave, and Sadie read the words on the monument, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Dear, dear, little fellow,” she murmured.

Their hands touched, and her fingers closed around his.

“Yes, Billy,” she said, as if to herself, “I guess that's so—I guess we belong out here—together.”

“You mean, Sadie,” he pleaded, “that after all——”

She turned to him then, and put her two hands on his shoulders so that their eyes met squarely.

“I mean, Billy, dear,” she said, “that if you want me I'm yours, but whether you want me or not, I love you; and I guess I've loved you all the time without quite knowing it.”

“Sadie! Sadie!” he whispered rapturously.

“Look, Billy!” she cried. “Look. It ain't raining any more—even 'way off there. The sun's shining just the same as 't is here.”

Sadie

"The sun's shining everywhere, Sadie," he replied; "the whole desert's filled with sunshine—now. Listen!"

On the little back porch of the Always Open sat Sansome practicing on his concertina. The strains were borne to them across the sand, on the evening breeze, and catching the air Sadie smiled.

"What's that he's playing?" Billy asked. "Sounds kind o' familiar, don't it?"

Sadie, her eyes brimming with mirth, drew the edge of her lip between her teeth, and pressed his hand.

"Don't you remember?" she replied. "It's that thing from Lohengrin you hear so much."

(1)

THE END

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